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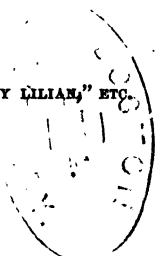
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BEAUTY'S DAUGHTERS.

A NOVEL.

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"PHYLLIS," "MOLLY BAWN," "AIRY FAIRY LILIAN," ETC.



PHILADELPHIA:
J. B. LIPPINCOTT & CO.
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BEAUTY'S DAUGHTERS.

CHAPTER I.

"'Tis well to be bonnie and wise,
'Tis well to be honest and true;
'Tis well to be off with the old love
Before you are on with the new."

"I'm tired of it all; I think I shall settle down and marry Kitty," says Sir John, his voice coming lazily through the small silvery cloud of smoke that curls upwards from his lips.

"The idea is charming," replies his cousin, with a half-smile; "so is your modesty. But Miss Kitty—are you quite sure she will accept you?"

"One is never quite sure of anything, dear boy, in these degenerate days, but as nearly as possible I think I am sure of Kitty. She is not the sort to play fast and loose with any man. She is very honest, and very real, and—er—quite different from the usual run of women," winds up Sir John, pleasantly, unaware that his remark is paltry, inasmuch as all men say this—and think it—of the women they chance at the moment to love.

"Yes, the others are a poor lot," says Arthur, faint amusement in his tone. "And you believe Miss Tremaine likes you?"

"I think so. I hope so. And at all events I am utterly positive I like her, and—that's all," finishes Sir John, rather abruptly, the ash of his cigar having grown beyond all bearing. He shakes it off gently, and, leaning back in his chair, awaits his cousin's answer.

"I thought you were equally positive about Miss Lisle, the year before last,—Mrs. Charteris, I mean."

"Was I?" Laughing slightly. "I hardly remember. My memory was never my strong point."

"If I were in love with a woman I don't think I should get over it so easily," says Arthur, meditatively.

"But was I in love with Fancy Charteris? I almost forget. No, I think not,—not really."

"You were terribly *épris*, at all events."

"Not even that. I confess I rather affected her society, because she was the most affording person I knew; but no more. For instance, I don't recollect the time I ever envied that elderly gentleman she called 'Robert.'"

"Charteris, you mean. For my own part, I always liked what I knew of him,—which was very little."

"So did I, for that matter. He was what one would call sterling, I dare say; but——"

"Yes?"

"There was a good deal of him, wasn't there?" says Sir John, plaintively. "He was all over the place. I never met so aggressively thriving a person, except, perhaps, in the matter of hair; and he *was* bald! Even there, you see, he excelled, because he was the baldest man I ever saw,—not a single hair on his head, I give you my word! And then I can't forget the buttons! Of course a fellow must make a fortune if he hasn't one; but surely there is something wrong about buttons. I don't think I ever quite got over it."

"I rather admire self-made men," says Arthur, with an attempt at severity. "There is a truer nobility in talent than in mere birth,—which, after all, is but an accident."

"I entirely agree with you. That is quite the sort of thing a man ought to say who is well-born himself. So liberal, you know, and that. But frankly, now, was there true nobility in Charteris's nose? And though his fortune was, surely there was no necessity why his clothes should look—self-made. And why on earth couldn't he try Mrs. Allen, or somebody, and cover his head? I never could imagine what Fancy saw in him."

"His money, I suppose," says Arthur, contemptuously.

Sir John regards him reflectively. He seldom troubles himself to think, but just now it does occur to him that his cousin's tone is unpleasant.

"What did Mrs. Charteris do to you?" he asks, presently. Blunden smiles.

"You think me severe," he says; "but the fact is, I never saw Mrs. Charteris, and only knew her husband very slightly before his marriage. So I am not speaking through personal pique; but, from all I have ever heard of her, I should not imagine her a very estimable character. Fast, wasn't she? Eh?"

"Not a bit of it," says Sir John. "People always say that of a woman if she happens to be pretty and good-humored and run after by men. One has to squint nowadays and wear red hair, and sit in a corner, if one wants to escape calumny. I always thought her charming. You knew the Lisles: how did you escape meeting Fancy?"

"Being abroad so much, I suppose. I really think I haven't been through a regular London season for seven years."

"And now you are going away again. You don't let us see too much of you, old boy, do you?"

"I'm a restless beggar," says Arthur, flinging away the end of his cigar and stretching his arms above his head. "I can't content myself for long anywhere. But I sha'n't give you the chance of forgetting me this time. Let me see: this is August, and I dare say I shall be back again about the beginning of May. By the by, if it does come off, shall I be in time for your wedding?"

"I hardly think so. If Kitty says 'Yes' I shall marry straight away. We have known each other quite long enough for that, you know."

"Three months, is it not?"

"An eternity, as we judge now."

"Look here, Jack," says Arthur Blunden, somewhat earnestly. "Before proposing to Miss Tremaine I would see Mrs. Charteris again if I were you. You used to talk a good deal of her in the old days, I remember; and you were considerably cut up when she married Charteris; and—I always thought there was something in it. I cannot altogether divest myself of that idea even now; and I certainly think it will be awkward if, when you meet her later on, you still find you feel sentimentally disposed towards her. She is a widow now, you told me. Take my advice and try it all

over again with her first before saying anything serious to Kitty Tremaine."

"I had no idea you were such a careful man," returns Sir John, with an amused laugh. "And what an objectionable 'again'! I don't believe I ever tried anything with Fancy Charteris, and I know she never cared in the very least for me."

"In that case I wish you luck with Miss Tremaine," says Arthur, slowly. "She is beyond doubt charming, and is almost the prettiest girl I ever saw,—except, perhaps, her sister Gretchen."

"You are enthusiastic," says Sir John. "What a pity it is they cannot hear you! They would never forget it to you. Yes, Gretchen is very pretty,—a sort of being one would compare to a flower, or a dove, or an angel, or some such poetic simile. Why don't you go in for her, Arthur? She would just suit you."

"Too good for me," says Mr. Blunden, carelessly. "I'm not of much account, you know; and, besides, I'm not one of your marrying fellows." With this he rises, and, going over to the window, stands there gazing out idly upon the darkening landscape,—upon the soft green lawns, and swaying beeches, and little flickering sunbeams that seem so loath to die.

"Who is that coming across the grass?" he asks, presently; and Sir John, thus accosted, gets up also and joins him at the window.

Standing thus side by side, with their backs to the room and only part of their faces to be seen, one cannot fail to be struck with the wonderful similarity between the two men. There is in each the same tall, straight figure, the chestnut hair, warm and rich in tint, the same beautifully turned cheek and chin destitute of beard, and, from where they stand, just a suspicion of the long drooping moustache.

"It is Brandy Tremaine, is it not?" Sir John says, after short scrutiny. "Let us come out to meet him."

"Her brother!" returns Arthur, with a little shrug. "Oh, by all means. Let us pay him every attention in our power."

Sir John laughs; and as they both turn to move towards the door there comes an opportunity to mark the great difference between them. About Arthur's mouth there is a

superciliousness, and in his blue eyes an expression keen and penetrating, quite foreign to Sir John's, whose mouth is always more prone to laughter than to contempt, and whose eyes rarely ever trouble themselves to look beyond the surface.

CHAPTER II.

"But all descriptions garble
The true effect, and so we had better not
Be too minute; an outline is the best—
A lively reader's fancy does the rest.—*Don Juan.*

DESCRIPTIONS, like comparisons, are odious. The "mind's eye," though following with willing haste the tongue that speaks, never quite grasps the truth. It sees either too much or too little. You may have the pen of a genius, and may paint your Paul or your Virginia in glowing colors, yet you will never get the uninitiated to understand in the very least what he or she may be like. Nevertheless a slight sketch of the Tremaines must be given.

They are, to begin with, that most interesting of all things, a handsome family. They are all handsome: the Tremaines would have scorned to acknowledge an "ugly duckling." For generations such a thing had not been so much as hinted at among them.

Mrs. Tremaine, though arrived at that age when the question of birthdays is viewed with disfavor, is still very good to look at, and eminently aristocratic. She rejoices in the thin transparent nostrils, the fine lips, the pale blue eyes, and high white brow that are generally supposed to belong by right to blue blood. She rarely laughs, but she has the most charming smile in the world,—a lingering, perfect smile, with something in it unwilling, that adds to it but another charm, compelling as it does the companion of the moment to accept it as an irrepressible tribute to his own particular powers of pleasing. She also possesses to perfection the calm indifference of manner that goes so far to hide the craving for settlements so undying in the breast of the British matron.

Mr. Tremaine is handsome also, but of a darker type, and

is one of those men who are indebted to their wives for their individuality. He is "Mrs. Tremaine's husband," and many people like him the better for that. He is a most estimable man, warm-hearted and affectionate, but I don't think even his best friend could call him brilliant. And when, twenty-five years before this story opens, he offered his hand, which was large,—and his fortune, which was larger,—to Miss Lascelles, the spoiled beauty of the year, all the world—that is, the male portion of it—expressed astonishment at his presumption. None, however, was expressed by Miss Lascelles herself, who accepted both the hand and fortune without hesitation.

The marriage proved a very happy one,—which disgusted the world—that is, the female portion of it—extremely. Mrs. Tremaine was fond of life and its good things, and very fond of her own way. Mr. Tremaine (wise man) never thwarted her in anything. The result of their union, therefore, was a most unusual amount of real contentment, and four pretty children.

Brandrum, the eldest,—commonly called "Brandy,"—is a cheerful, perhaps rather too cheerful, young gentleman of twenty-three. He calls himself a hussar; but, as he is generally on leave all the year round, his friends say it doesn't seem to matter much what he calls himself: any other regiment (for all it is likely to see of him) will do just as well. He has curly hair and blue eyes, like all the Tremaines, and a smile like a cherub; and women as a rule pet him more than is good for him.

The second child, Kitty, is exceedingly handsome, tall, and dark, like her father, and an undoubted success. All last season she was caressed and made much of, and had actually been able to refuse an earl,—greatly to her mother's chagrin. But when, towards the close of July, she left town with every satisfactory symptom of having made a conquest of Sir John Blunden, Mrs. Tremaine forgave her, and devoutly, though secretly, thanked her stars that she had been disobedient in the matter of old Lord Sugden, who, though of higher rank than Sir John, was of infinitely shorter rent-roll.

Sir John as yet has not proposed in form, but words have been spoken and looks interchanged; and, though nobody enlarges on the subject, everybody hopes he means to do so.

Although near neighbors,—Coolmore, the Blunden property, being only eight miles distant from the Court, where the Tremaines live,—he and Kitty had never met until that last memorable occasion in town; and now that he has followed her to the country, under the pretence that his fine old house wants renovating, everybody feels that Kitty in effect is Lady Blunden,—Sir John being a young man not addicted to the country except at certain seasons, and then very much fonder of other people's houses than his own.

Perhaps Kitty herself is the only one who feels any serious doubt about his ultimate intentions. She knows him to be a careless, easy-going, good-humored young man, who has held his own successfully through many a hot campaign with managing mothers, and who up to this has cautiously avoided matrimony as one might the plague or any other misfortune. Young men like Sir John, who have proved themselves over-attentive to various young women year after year, and yet have obstinately abstained from bringing their attentions to a satisfactory finish, are generally termed flirts: Kitty has heard Sir John so called, and in her heart has not liked the speaker the better for saying it. A man who flirts systematically is a disgraceful thing,—so she tells herself,—yet she cannot bring herself to think Sir John disgraceful. He has said things to her that have interested her and have had a good deal to do with her rejection of Lord Sugden and others,—things that might almost be construed into an offer of marriage: and still she cannot be certain he means to propose to her. In town there had been many opportunities to speak had he so willed it, but he had not seized them. Above all there was that last evening at Lady Brompton's, when the lights burned low in the conservatory, and the flowers slept, and the very stillness breathed love, yet he had not spoken. No one, of course, mentions Sir John to Kitty Tremaine as an acknowledged lover, nor does she ever mention him as anything but a casual acquaintance, even to Gretchen; though in her she would have surely gained a sympathetic listener.

Pretty Gretchen! with her pale pure face, and little Grecian nose, and great blue eyes, that remind one of nothing so much as the sweet Czar violet. She is two years younger than Kitty, and smaller and slighter, with an expression calm and unspeakably tender. To think of Gretchen is to think of

moonlight, or the soft perfume of roses, or faint strains of sweetest music. To see her is to love her. To know her is a "liberal education."

Then there is Flora, the last but by no means the least of the Tremaines,—a tall and very determined person of twelve, who would reject with ignominy the notion that she is still a child. Her eyes are gray, steady, and severe; her small mouth is incorruptible. She is one of those awful people with whom a spade is a spade; and to even hint a harmless falsehood in her presence, and to suddenly find those gray orbs fixed upon you, is to lose instant self-control, and to long for the earth to open and swallow you up. She admires Kitty,—though, being cognizant of her faults, she does not scruple to tell her of them occasionally; she adores Gretchen, and maintains an undying feud with Brandy, to whom she is a joy and an everlasting resource.

Kitty, having searched the house diligently for Gretchen, and failed to find her, walks into the school-room as a last chance, and looks anxiously around her; whereupon Flora raises her head from her German in a vain hope that something is going to occur to put an end to her detested lessons; and Brandy, who is smoking a cigar against all rules upon an elderly sofa, asks, inelegantly, "What's the row?"

"Meg, are you here? Where is Gretchen?" asks Kitty, anxiously.

"Meg was meek, and Meg was mild,
And bonnie Meg was Nature's child,"

quotes Flora, gayly, glad of the interruption.

"If it is 'Nature's child' you want," says Brandy, obligingly, sinking back again upon his faded though luxurious cushions, "I am almost sure you will find her in the garden."

Thus encouraged, Miss Tremaine crosses the room, and, putting her head out of the open window, says, loudly, "Are you there, Gretchen?" to the back of a pretty summer-house all overgrown with silvery clematis and the fast reddening Virginia creeper.

A soft voice answers,—

"Yes. Do you want me, Kitty?" And Gretchen, emerging from her bower, stands gazing inwards, one white hand shielding her eyes from the sun.

"Not I so much as mamma. She wishes you to go visiting with her. Be quick, dearest: the carriage is ordered."

"Coming," says Gretchen, disappearing behind the escalonias and running down the garden-walks through borders of glowing flowers.

"I wish, Brandy," says Kitty, drawing in her head, "you would not smoke in the school-room. You know mamma particularly objects to your doing so. And why have a smoking-room, if people won't smoke in it?"

"Why, indeed?" returns Brandy, mildly. "I only smoke here, against my better judgment, to oblige Flora, who is never entirely happy except when enveloped in a thick cloud of tobacco."

"No, I am not," says Flora, indignantly, but wrongly.

"You hear her," says Brandy, with a faint but triumphant flourish of his right hand.

"I mean I hate it, I perfectly abhor it. It runs right up my nose and into my brain, and makes me quite dazy," says Flora; "I can't do a bit of my German with the odiousness of it."

"Mere imagination. I always found it an incentive to study," declares Mr. Tremaine, positively. "I can't bear smoking myself: it disagrees with me, and in fact I only indulge in it in the vain hope of knocking some intelligence into your exceedingly dull head."

"Don't call my head dull," says Flora. "I've as good a head as ever you had, and a great deal better. I wasn't spun for an examination, at all events."

"My dear Flora!" says Kitty.

"Yes, isn't she a darling?" remarks Brandy, undisturbed.

"I can't tell you how I admire our Flora; she is so *spirituelle*, so full of wit, *espèglerie*, and all the rest of it."

"I wonder that you will still be talking, Signor Benedick; nobody marks you," quotes Flora, disdainfully. "I should think your colonel must love you."

"For once," says Brandy, "you have hit the right nail on the head: such perspicacity in one so young is truly delightful. Yes, he adores me."

"So one might readily imagine," murmurs Miss Flora, with cutting irony.

"Now, might one?" questions Brandy, assuming an air

of deep thought. "I rather doubt it. I should fancy that, with regard to this point, the common observer would be at fault. Your apparent certainty on the matter says wonders for your insight into character, as any one seeing me and that good man—our colonel—in close proximity would hardly, I think, arrive at so satisfactory a conclusion as you have done. An outsider would, I dare say, consider him difficult, and would not suspect him of the *bonhomie* with which he is actually saturated."

"Nonsense," says Florence, rudely, unable any longer to maintain the ironical position; "you know I mean that he must hate you. He thinks you, no doubt, the greatest nuisance in the regiment, and that is why he gives you so much leave."

"What a pity you don't know him!" says Brandy. "You might captivate him, and get him to curtail it."

"You may take your books to my room, Flora," says Miss Tremaine, with gentle dignity.

"Don't you mind my smoking there?" asks Brandy, instantly, in a tone full of innocent surprise.

"You! Don't attempt it, Brandy. I am not speaking of you," exclaims Kitty. "The last time you went into my dressing-room you upset everything in it. You shall never enter it again."

"But, my dear girl, I can't desert Flora. I have undertaken her education, and I must go through with it. Besides, you forget I am lonely down here, and that she is my sole companion. You are too dignified, Gretchen is too ethereal, but Miss Flora Tremaine," says Brandy, with mild enthusiasm, "is my *beau-ideal* of budding womanhood,—the very acme of perfection."

Flora laughs sardonically and flings a heavy volume of Schiller at him, which he dodges with admirable presence of mind.

"I think you might show your admiration for her in a less objectionable manner," says Kitty; "for instance, by throwing that horrid cigar into the grate."

"What! And set fire to all those elaborate trimmings? Never. Far be it from me. Like all our family, I strenuously object to reckless extravagance."

"I like that," says Flora, scornfully. "What about your

tailor's bill that came this morning? I heard of it, though you may think I didn't."

"Such an absurd thought never struck me. I have known you too long for that; and we know the proverb about 'little pitchers.'"

"Your ears are a great deal longer than mine," says Flora.

"Well, well, don't let us wander from the original subject. Think what a drawback it would be to you in the future, my dear Flora, not to be able to appreciate your husband's cigars. Why, positively, unless educated up to the mark you would not know whether he was smoking pure Havannas or Early York."

"Brandy, how can you talk such nonsense to the child?" says Miss Tremaine, who is busily examining the child's exercises.

"It doesn't matter what he says, as I shall never marry," puts in Flora, with conviction; "I wouldn't put up with the caprices of any man; I know too much about them for that!"

"I envy you your experience," says Brandy, with a laugh of the richest enjoyment. "Stick to that, dear child, till your hair is gray. But in the mean time, lest some Adonis should induce you to alter your mind, let me give you a hint. Do you know that young women who object to smoking and insist on quenching their husbands' pipes invariably drive those poor men to clubs and all sorts of naughtinesses, and generally play the mischief all round?"

"I wonder you don't suffer from a sore throat," suggests Miss Flora, with a sneer.

"I would suffer anything for your sake. It is the fatherly interest I take in you that induces me to deliver this lecture; and, as I shouldn't like to see you in a hole hereafter, I shall smoke one cigar here daily until you can lay your hand upon your heart and tell me honestly you——"

"Very good; all right. Then I shall do no more German or anything else," with angry resignation.

"A very trifling consideration, when compared with your chances of domestic bliss."

"Kitty, I wish you would speak to Brandy. Oh! is that another mistake? Well, I can't help it if he will come here and talk to me all the time——"

"There was a young lady named Flora,
Who had a devoted adorer;
He smoked all the day,
Which, some people say,
Was the reason her German did floor her.

Isn't that a very neat impromptu? I think I should take to rhyming, only I hear it don't pay nowadays; and I shouldn't like to fling away undoubted talent," says Brandy, unabashed.

"I wouldn't, if I were you," witheringly.

"Flora, I don't like your tone. There is an unpleasant ring in it. Have you never heard that little girls should not be pert to their superiors?"

"Superiors, indeed!" says Flora.

"Certainly your superior," says Brandy.

"Oh, do try and be silent for even five minutes, if you won't go away," exclaims Flora, wrathfully; "I have not got half down one page yet, and Monsieur Sol will be so angry to-morrow."

"Read it out loud to me," returns Brandy, drowsily: "it will improve your pronunciation, and you can have the advantage of my knowledge. I don't think anything of that Monsieur of yours. He looks like an impostor, and I'm positive he is a Scotchman. I feel deliciously sleepy: so go on,—I am sure a very little more of *your* German will finish me comfortably."

"Kitty, I shall go with you to your room," says Flora, desperately, gathering up her books and beating an ignominious retreat.

CHAPTER III.

"It fell upon a day."

"WHERE are you going, mamma?" asks Gretchen, entering her mother's chamber, with a delicious little pink-rose flush upon her cheeks, born of her swift run through the scented garden. Kitty by this time, having safely incarcerated Flora in her dressing-room, has also joined her mother.

"To see poor Kenneth Dugdale," returns Mrs. Tremaine.

"I actually never heard of his arrival until this afternoon. And it appears he has been in the country now a week. Such a very long time to be in ignorance; but your father is always most careless. He must have known of it, and, I suppose, forgot as usual."

"Perhaps he didn't hear of it," says Gretchen.

"Well, at all events the visit cannot be put off any longer; and of course I shall go myself. His mother was my dearest friend. You may as well come with me, Gretchen, as Kitty is so busy. Poor fellow! it is such a sad case. Quite the saddest I know. It makes me positively wretched even to think of it. Thank you, dear; yes, you may ring the bell. I think I *will* take a glass of sherry before I start."

"You mean Maudie Dugdale's brother?" asks Gretchen,—
"the poor man who broke his back out hunting, or dislocated his spine, or did something horrible? You and Kitty, I remember, used to tell me of him last year."

"The doctors now say he will be an invalid all his life. Can't stir off his sofa, I've been told."

"I think I can recollect him years ago," says Gretchen, musingly. "He was down here, was he not?—a tall, fair boy of about fifteen. Old Mr. Dugdale, his uncle, was so fond and proud of him. Both he, and Maudie before she left for India, never seemed to tire when telling me of him."

"There was a sincere attachment on both sides, I believe. He never would come here since his uncle's death, although that event made Laxton Hall his own. It seems sad that he should come here now for the first time, as master, only to die."

"He may not die for years," says Mrs. Tremaine, who is vainly struggling with a refractory bracelet. "That old man in town with the one large tooth—that wonderful surgeon, you know, Sir—Sir—what was his name, Kitty?—said he might live for a long time. (I wonder they can't make proper clasps nowadays! Thank you, dear.) But poor Kenneth was so wilful, gave himself up at once, and, because one doctor spoke unfavorably of his case, could hardly be persuaded to see another. Old Sir—Sir—told me all about it. What *was* his name, Kitty?"

"Sir Henry Pilaster."

"Of course; of course. Plaister they call him in town,—

so rude of them. He told me the poor boy was greatly changed."

"He must be," says Kitty. "I met him wherever I went the season before last, and thought him the gayest fellow possible. He was a general favorite all round, it seemed to me; and now, we hear, he is silent, morbid, melancholy."

"Who can wonder at it?" exclaims Gretchen, with deep compassion. "To go in one moment from a state of perfect health to what must be only a living death,—the worst in that it is living,—the very thought is depressing: what must the reality be! If such a thing were to happen to me I think I should refuse to speak to any one; I should just turn my face to the wall and cry and cry until I died."

"Oh, no, you wouldn't," says Kitty, with a little laugh, patting her cheek softly; "I know you better than that. At first you would sigh a little and repine in secret; and then one day you would take yourself to task, and say to yourself, 'After all, are there not others more unhappy than I am?' And then you would begin to think how you could lighten the cares of other people."

"You are describing an angel," says Gretchen, with a faint blush, and a suspicion of reproach in her tone.

"My dearest Gretchen," breaks in Mrs. Tremaine at this moment, "do run away and put on your things. It is quite half-past three, and you know how your father hates to have the horses kept waiting." As a rule, Mrs. Tremaine alludes to her husband as though he belonged to the girls alone, as though he was their exclusive property and they alone were responsible for his eccentricities. "Now, don't be five minutes, darling, or I shall be really vexed," she says, mildly, her thoughts intent upon her card-case, which is nowhere to be found.

* * * * *

Above in the heavens—

"Apollo, Delius, or of older use
All-seeing Hyperion—what you will—
Has mounted."

All the air is hot and heavy with the strength and fierceness of his glory.

As the carriage rolls along the dusty road, bearing Gretchen and her mother to Laxton Hall, the horses fling up their heads impatiently, as though in eager search of the cool wind that comes not, and throw upwards little passionate flecks of foam, that, lighting upon their backs, gleam like snow-flakes against their glossy skins.

The day is merry with the voices of many birds that send their sweet hymns of praise from wood and thicket. There is no less harmonious sound to mar their melody. A sense of peace and warmth has lulled the world into a mid-day sleep.

Below in the bay the ocean, vast, illimitable, has also sunk to rest. Not a breath, not a murmur, comes to disturb the serenity of its repose. Only from out the great gray rocks, that seem ever to keep eternal watch, dash the sea-birds wildly from their hidden nests in search of watery prey. Their snowy wings expanded glint and glisten beneath the sun's hot rays like silver lightning as they hover above the great deep and then drop into its bosom to disappear only to rise again.

Far away upon the horizon the sea and the sky have met and melted into each other's embrace. All is one soft ethereal mass of palest blue: in vain to seek the termination of one, the beginning of the other. The heaven itself is a continued sea, where tiny cloudlets, yellow-tinged, stand out as isles, and placid lakes and quiet shores are numerous.

By this time Gretchen and her mother have reached the gates of Laxton, have entered, and are driving swiftly down the long dark avenue. Having never seen it since the old man's death, Gretchen now turns her head admiringly from side to side, as though to recall to mind the pretty spots once loved.

On one side can be seen a small but perfect lake, on which swans float gracefully in and out between the broad green leaves of the water-lilies that are hardly so fair as their own breasts. On the other side stretches a vast expanse of park and upland, swelling, waving,—one grand mass of living foliage, tender greens and tawny browns and russet reds, while through them here and there, like a faint streak of moonlight, comes a suspicion of the distant ocean.

"What a perfect place it is!" says Gretchen, dreamily, yet with a certain amount of honest enthusiasm.

"Quite so," says Mrs. Tremaine, briskly, who never dreams, "and just fifteen thousand pounds a year. Really, it is most unfortunate about that poor young man. By the by, I quite forget who the next heir will be."

"If he was very nice I shouldn't mind marrying him," says Gretchen, idly, with a little lazy laugh. "Oh, see, mother, that exquisite touch of light upon the hill beyond—how beautiful! It sounds wicked, but do you know I am rather glad this Mr. Dugdale cannot go about much? New people have such a horrid trick of altering things, and cutting down trees, and generally behaving very badly. If he is as apathetic as you say, I dare say he will let well alone."

"I dare say," says Mrs. Tremaine. "I should rather think George Dugdale's son would inherit. A most unpleasant man, and a very distant cousin; but no doubt the younger branches are better mannered."

Then the carriage sweeps round a softened angle and draws up before the hall-door. It is opened, and a very gorgeous personage in irreproachable garments comes down the steps and tells Mrs. Tremaine that Mr. Dugdale is pretty well, and down-stairs, but that he is not in the habit of receiving visitors.

As he draws towards the close of this little speech, Mrs. Tremaine—who, to judge by her expression, must be utterly unaware that any one has been speaking—takes out a card, scribbles on it a word or two, and gives it to one of her men, who gives it to the other man, who gives it to somebody else inside the hall, who vanishes.

Then ensues a pause that might be a silent one but for the faint little laugh that breaks from Gretchen.

"What is it?" asks her mother, rousing herself from an apparent reverie.

"Very little, dear, almost nothing. I was merely wondering how you would look if this very difficult young gentleman sends you word he will not see you."

"That is impossible," replies Mrs. Tremaine, calmly. "No young gentleman ever sent me such a message. He will, of course, be very pleased to see me."

She is right. He will be very pleased to see her. The gorgeous personage returns presently with a few words to that effect; whereupon Mrs. Tremaine descends from her

carriage, and Gretchen follows her, and they rustle through halls and corridors, across a library, and past a heavy *portière*, into a small room beyond, where lies the hero of the hour.

It is a charming room, not large, but comfort itself. Everything is pale, or faintly tinted; there is scarcely a pronounced color anywhere, unless, perhaps, in the huge bowls of sweetly-smelling flowers that lie about in graceful disorder on all the tables. Against the walls and on the brackets quaint pieces of china frown, and simper, and curtsy, and make hideous grimaces. Upon the cabinets, and in them, old English punch-bowls push themselves officiously before the notice of dainty Chelsea maidens, and cups innocent of handles stand in rows.

Wedgwood jugs, and Worcester plates, and little bits of rarest Sèvres shine conspicuously everywhere. There are eight or nine fine pictures,—some by modern artists,—and a good deal of handsome carving.

The whole place seems full of sunshine as through the open windows the soft breezes creep shyly in and out. It was Maud Dugdale's room in the old man's life, before she married and went to India, and even yet the charm of her presence seems to haunt it.

The windows, made in casement fashion, are thrown wide, so that the ivy and the straggling roses that cover the walls outside are peeping in, forming a bower picturesque and perfumed.

The fond little sunbeams, too, lest they should be forgotten, have stolen in, and are flecking all they touch with gold. Across the grass comes a tender murmuring as of doves from the wood beyond. It is one of those calm, sleepy days when "all the air a solemn stillness holds" and a sense of peace makes itself felt. The "tender grace" of the hour, the careless artistic beauty of the room and all its surroundings, touch Gretchen, though vaguely, and then her eyes wander to the couch close to the window, upon which a young man lies full length.

As her glance meets his, a great and sudden pity fills her heart. He is a very tall young man, and, though somewhat slight, is finely formed. He is fair, with that rich nut-brown hair through which soft threads of gold run generously; his face is not so much handsome as very beautiful. His eyes

are large and of an intense blue,—eyes that before misfortune clouded them were friends to laughter, but are now sad with unutterable melancholy.

His mouth beneath his light moustache is tender and mobile, but firm. Originally there must have been a certain amount of happy recklessness about the whole face that fascinated and contrasted pleasantly with its great gentleness. But the happiness and gayety and laughter have all disappeared, leaving only regret and passionate protest in their place, and something that is almost despair in the blue eyes.

He flushes painfully as Mrs. Tremaine enters the room, and, closing his left hand with some nervous force upon the arm of the couch, makes the customary effort to rise. It is only a momentary effort. Almost on the instant he remembers and sinks back again passive. But the remembrance and the futile attempt are indescribably bitter.

"Dear Kenneth, I knew you would see me," says Mrs. Tremaine, quickly, with an unusual amount of kindness in her tone, going up to the couch and taking his hand in both hers.

"It is more than good of you to come to me," says Dugdale, raising himself on his elbow. "You must forgive me that I cannot rise to receive you." As he speaks he smiles, but it is a smile that saddens one. Even as their voices sound in each other's ears both he and Mrs. Tremaine remember the hour when last they met. They see the brilliant ball-room, the glowing flowers, the pretty faces, and all the *piquante* crowd that had courted and petted and smiled their sweetest upon poor "beauty" Dugdale.

Involuntarily Mrs. Tremaine stoops and presses her lips to his forehead. A sympathy that is almost motherly stirs her breast. Had he been in good health her greeting in all probability would have been cold, but now in his affliction he seems very nearly dear to her.

"Of course I would come to see you," she says, gently, "and I have brought Gretchen with me. I suppose you and she hardly remember each other." She moves a little to one side, and Gretchen, coming nearer, lays her hand in his.

"I recollect Mr. Dugdale," she says, half to her mother, while smiling kindly upon Kenneth; "I seldom forget a face,

and you are not so greatly changed. But you were only a big boy then, and I was a little child. It is very long ago."

"I don't remember you," Kenneth answers, reluctantly, shaking his head. "Your face is strange to me; and yet—how could I have forgotten it? It does not say much for my memory, does it? Is your sister quite well?"

"Kitty? Yes, thank you."

"I am so very glad you have come down," says Mrs. Tremaine. "I am sure the fresh country air will do you good."

"Will it?" says Dugdale, in a peculiar tone and with a slight contraction of the brows; then, as though ashamed of his curtness, he goes on quickly: "Perhaps so. At all events I rather fancy the country just at this time, and the view from the windows here is perfect. It was Maudie's room, you know. One can see where she had the trees cut down to give her a glimpse of the ocean."

"It is charming,—quite too lovely," returns Mrs. Tremaine, who in reality thinks it a little bleak, and has a rooted objection to the sea. "How is dear Maud? Have you heard from her lately?"

"Yes. Last Monday. She is very happy, and seems to be enjoying herself tremendously. They have gone pretty well up the country, and appear to have fallen in with rather a nice lot. She says the life suits her, and she likes it. She would, you know. She was always a lazy child,—fond of lying in the sun, and that."

"Maudie and I were great friends," says Gretchen, turning from the open window where she has been standing, looking like a picture framed in by the drooping ivy and the clustering roses. "How pretty she was, and how full of *verve*! I was more sorry than I can tell you when Major Scarlett married her and took her away from us."

"Every one liked her, dear little thing," says Dugdale.

"I have not been here since she left; and this room reminds me of her so forcibly," says Gretchen, with some regret in her tone. "I can almost imagine I see her over there at that easel bending her sleek head above her paintings,—which were always quite impossible."

"She certainly wasn't a young Turner," Kenneth says, with a faint laugh.

"No," echoing the laugh gayly. "I used to wonder how she kept her hair so smooth. Dear Maudie! everything here recalls her so vividly."

"I like this room," says Dugdale, looking round him. "It is small, that is one comfort. When a fellow has knocked about a good deal in barracks he gets an affection for his walls and likes to have them near him. All the other rooms are so vast they make one almost lose sight of one's own identity. Though, perhaps,"—slowly and with a sudden accession of gloom,—“there might be worse faults than that.”

"There is one fault even in this your favorite room," says Gretchen, hastily, anxious to turn his thoughts from their present unhappy channel.

"And that is?" asks he, with some animation.

"You have flowers, but no roses," says Gretchen, nodding her pretty head disdainfully at all the china bowls full of flowers that are sweet but ill-chosen; "and what is a bunch of flowers without a rose?"

"A mere mockery," replies he, catching her humor; "yes, of course you would notice that. But you must pardon my want of taste. Remember, I have no one to gather them for me."

"I shall do it this moment. I can see some tempting ones just below me," says Gretchen, craning her neck over the balcony. "May I?"

"Oh! thank you," exclaims the young man, gratefully, a little color coming into his pale face. And then he watches her as she crosses the balcony and descends the steps, her long dove-gray skirts trailing behind her,—watches her musingly as she moves with unstudied grace from tree to tree, a fairer flower herself than any she can gather,—a veritable symphony in gray,—while Mrs. Tremaine talks on, and succeeds, as she always does, in making herself intensely agreeable.

Then Gretchen returns with the roses, and, going up to him, puts them softly to his face.

"Are they not sweet?" she says; and he answers back again,—

"They are indeed," gratitude in his face and voice.

"They will die, darling. Ring for some water and arrange them in one of those Wedgwood bowls," says Mrs. Tremaine.

"If I may have them here beside me just as Miss Tremaine has brought them in, without water and without arrangement, I think I should prefer it," says Dugdale; whereupon Gretchen, feeling pleased, she hardly knows why, brings them back to him and lays them on the small table near him.

Then Mrs. Tremaine rises and tells him they must really go.

"Must you?" says Dugdale, regretfully, and wonders vaguely how he could have felt so bored half an hour ago at the mere thought of having to entertain them.

"Thank you a thousand times for coming," he says, earnestly. "Do you know I never realized how lonely I was until you came?"

"Then I am afraid we have done you more harm than good," says Gretchen, mischievously glancing at him over her mother's shoulder, with a kind little smile.

"Oh, no, you must not say that. On the contrary, you have given me something pleasant to think of. I shall now live in the hope that you will come again," returns Dugdale, this time addressing Gretchen rather than her mother.

"It is quite dreadful your being so much alone,—so disheartening," says Mrs. Tremaine, thoughtfully. "Well, we must see—we must see; oh, yes, of course we shall come again, and soon, very soon. Good-by, my dear Kenneth; and pray do not keep those roses so close to you. Flowers are always unwholesome,—so full of midges, and flies, and other unpleasant things."

"I don't believe there is anything unpleasant in these flowers," Kenneth replies, with conviction, letting his glance rest on Gretchen for one moment as she bids him farewell. Her clear eyes look calmly into his; his hand closes round hers. This visit, so unlooked for, has proved inexpressibly sweet to him, has linked him once more with the old world on which he has so resolutely turned his back, refusing to be comforted, and yet for which he has never ceased to pine daily, hourly.

There is a color on his lips now, a warmth at his heart, that ever since his sad accident has been unknown to it. He holds Gretchen's hand closely, as though loath to let her go; and she, being quick to notice the signs of grief or longing in those around her, returns the pressure faintly, and says "Good-by" in her gentlest tones. It seems to him there is a

hope, a promise in her voice that sustains him. Yes, she will surely come again. The thought almost reconciles him to the weary days that lie before him, in which life, in its fullest sense, must be denied him. He has so long been a recluse, has so long brooded in solitude over his own misfortunes, that now to hold sudden converse with his fellow-creatures seems strange to him, and good as strange. He watches the girl's departing figure, as she follows her mother from the room, with a wistful gaze. At the door she pauses, and looking back at him again, bestows upon him a last little friendly smile and bow, after which she vanishes.

To Dugdale it seems as though the sunshine has gone with her. He sighs impatiently, and with a gesture of distaste closes the book he had thought so interesting half an hour before and flings it from him. A gloomy expression falls into his eyes, and the old look of heavy discontent settles round his lips; he raises his hand, and by chance it falls upon the roses at his side. His face softens. Lifting them, he separates them slowly and examines them one by one.

CHAPTER IV.

"Wherever sorrow is, relief would be."—*As You Like It.*

"WELL, what did you think of him, Gretchen?" asks Kitty.

It is many hours later, and dinner is almost at an end. The servants have departed to a more congenial though a lower world, and Brandy and Flora have brought to a successful termination the mild but vigorous dispute that has endured through every course.

"I thought him handsome,—particularly handsome,—but sad," says Gretchen, a little absently. She has been somewhat silent since her return home, and apparently full of thought.

"Quite depressing," remarks Mrs. Tremaine: "one hardly knew what to say to him, poor fellow. Really, but for Gretchen I don't know how I should have sustained conver-

sation. She cheered him a good deal, I fancied. Yet he is not emaciated in appearance. He is pale, of course, but really looks wonderfully well; only melancholy, you know, and—hopeless, it struck me.”

“Yes, hopeless,” repeats Gretchen, quietly.

“He evidently depressed Gretchen too,” says Brandy, screwing a most unnecessary glass into his eye; “she looks as if holding up one’s finger would make her weep. I have been lost in admiration of her charming face ever since dinner began. That pensive expression suits her down to the ground. The general effect, however, was spoiled by her appetite, which was most objectionably healthy. You ought to do the thing thoroughly, my dear Gretchen,—artistically,—when you go about it at all. Have some more ginger? You appear to like it.”

“I think he is lonely,” says Gretchen, suddenly. “I glanced back as I was leaving the room, and found him gazing after us with a terribly wistful look in his eyes. I am sure he was thinking he would have no one to speak to him all the rest of the long evening.”

“You should have gone back and offered your services,” says Brandy, severely: “I hate half-hearted charity. I don’t know how you can enjoy your dessert with such an evident sense of gratification when you picture to yourself that poor young man absolutely pining for you. *Do* have some more ginger. I know you love it.”

“Well, I will, then,” says Gretchen, with a little grimace, letting him help her.

“But this is a most miserable state of affairs,” exclaims Mr. Tremaine, anxiously. “It is most unneighborly and inhospitable to think of his being there all alone, when perhaps he would like to be here. It is sufficient to drive him melancholy mad lying there all day long brooding over his misfortunes.”

“You are going to propose something, Harry,” says Mrs. Tremaine, with a smile.

“And you guess what it is?” with an answering smile.

“Yes. I think we ought to invite him here: poor Mary Spencer’s son: is that it? You see I always know your thoughts.”

“Ah! that is just what was in my heart,” Gretchen breaks

in, eagerly. "How thoughtful you are, papa! I am sure he would be happier here. Brandy may laugh at me, but when I was leaving his room to-day I would have given almost anything to be able to go back again, to have got a book and drawn my chair close to his and read to him for an hour or so. It seemed cruel to be so strong and healthy, when he was so afflicted."

"Your sister Gretchen's fate will be a Methody parson," says Brandy, *sotto voce*, to Flora, who, indignantly repudiating the idea, at once opens up another exhaustive argument, that lasts on and off till bed-hour.

"The library would be a charming place for him to lie in all day," says Kitty, with animation. "It is such a pretty room, and we occupy it so much during the morning, and nearly all the evening."

"But his bedroom," ponders Mrs. Tremaine, thoughtfully. "I could see at once how painfully sensitive he is about his unhappy condition, and I don't think he would submit to be carried up- and down-stairs in a strange house."

"He may have my morning room," says Gretchen, "willingly: it is off the library, and he can be easily brought from one room to the other."

"But you will miss your room, dearest," says her mother.

"No. For the time being I shall inflict myself upon Kitty. You don't mind, do you, Kitty?"

"Then I shall go over to-morrow and insist upon his coming," says Mr. Tremaine: "I won't hear of a refusal."

"I think, pappy, it would be almost better if mamma went," puts in Gretchen, very gently, giving her father's hand a soft little squeeze. "You are the kindest old pappy in the world, but perhaps mamma could explain better; you know"—with a glance at her mother—"how wonderfully clever she is about all such matters."

"Do you hear her, the oily hypocrite?" murmurs Brandy, still *sotto voce*, to the incensed Flora. "Buttering up both the Pater and the Mater in one breath. Ugh! it makes me ill."

"You are a miserable creature," returns Flora, with subdued but evident force; "and I forget myself when I condescend to bandy words with you. She is the sweetest creature on earth, but you are incapable of appreciating her. There is not a drop of 'oil' in her body!"

"You would have to boil her down before you could swear to that," returns Brandy, provokingly. "Do you *want* to boil her? Why, positively you are worse than Wainwright, and Hannah Dobbs, and all that lot. And your own sister, too! Why, bad as you are, only that I heard you with my own ears, I shouldn't have believed that of you."

"I never said it. How can you even hint at such a thing?" says Flora, angrily; whereupon the argument waxes hotter and hotter, until Mrs. Tremaine, fortunately rising, carries off Flora to the drawing-room, and so puts an end to it—for the moment.

CHAPTER V.

"Now, what is love? I will you show:
A thing that creeps and cannot go,
A prize that passeth to and fro!"

SEVEN long days have dawned and waned; August is a week older. Visions of yellow September, of partridges, and of good red setters haunt the brain. The last faint remembrance of summer has indeed departed, but mid-autumn asserts itself in all its glory: "*Le roi est mort; vive le roi!*"

In the library at the Towers both the clocks have carefully chimed four strokes each. As one begins precisely as the other finishes, the listener may be excused for wondering if it can be really eight o'clock. The day is drowsy and full of a calm serenity. All nature seems at rest; only the soft but hasty wind rustling through the distant firs—making them creak and groan as though they are tender spirits in mortal pain—makes itself heard.

The sunbeams are throwing flickering shadows through the trees; little touches of light, yellow as golden corn, are dashing madly here and there in very gayety of youth and joy, dancing on Flora's pale pink gown, enriching Kitty's hair, and, lingering softly in Gretchen's eyes, makes those sweet homes of love blue as the skies above her.

There is a sense of languor and unspeakable rest in the whole air; every one feels inclined to smile and to believe

without asseveration in the amiability of his or her neighbor. The flowers lift up their heads; the grasses bend and rustle; above in the topmost branches of the trees even the "small fowle maken merrie."

Upon a lounge, close to the library window, the sash of which is lifted high as it can go, lies Kenneth Dugdale; while outside the younger members of the Tremaine family, with two or three guests, sit upon garden-chairs, and upon grass when chairs fail them.

Kitty, with delicately flushed cheeks and half-veiled eyes, is making a pretty pretence at work, with Sir John Blunden stretched at her feet; but I think she is netting more of his love into the tender mesh of her heart than gold beads into her embroidery.

Gretchen is not working at all: work and Gretchen are deadly foes; she lies in a little graceful attitude of utter *abandon* upon the sward, with daisies plucked in idle mood all round her, drinking in the beauties of the day; and near her, very near her, is a young man,—one of the Scarletts of Scarlett Mere, a devoted adherent of her majesty and Miss Gretchen's slave. Dugdale, watching in the open window near, marks how his eyes brighten, and his color deepens, and his whole face gains life and warmth when she smiles upon him, or when her hand by chance comes close to his, or when some kind little word meant exclusively for him reaches his ears.

Every now and then the group outside address a word or two to the invalid, "poor Dugdale," who, sitting apart from them, still amuses himself listening to the wise and silly and merry remarks that fall from them as time goes by. He had accepted the invitation to spend some weeks at the Towers, given by Mrs. Tremaine in person, with an alacrity, a willingness, that amazed even himself, and now knows he has been happier during these past few days than he has been for months.

He is Gretchen's special charge. With her whole heart—the tenderest that ever felt for mortals—she pities him, and all day long devises little secret plans for his amusement, and weaves plots whereby he shall reap such comfort as may be gained from the knowledge that those around him are eager to do him good service. To be maimed, or miserable, or

poverty-stricken, or despised by the world, is the surest way to gain Gretchen's sweetest smiles and tenderest glances and most honeyed words. And already Dugdale has learned to listen impatiently for her coming, to distinguish her step among a thousand, to read with unerring accuracy each change in her expressive countenance. To him the pleasantest hours in all the twenty-four are those in which she brings her book and her gentle presence to his side, and, drawing a chair to his couch, reads to him in her low sweet voice, that most "excellent thing in woman."

Just now she raises her head and sends to him a smile soft and frank and full of good fellowship, that raises envy in the breast of Scarlett, who would have all her smiles and every thought of her heart his own.

"How good you are to that fellow Dugdale!" he says, begrudgingly; and Gretchen answers with mild reproach,—

"Remember how sad it is for him; how different he is from you and me, who can go about, enjoying the sun, and the flowers, and all there is of the best."

"Well, of course it is hard on him," says Scarlett, growing repentant, "not to be able to walk, you know, and that: I certainly shouldn't like to be a cripple, you know; should you?"

Which answer vexes Gretchen more than she would like to acknowledge.

"He is not a cripple," she says, coldly, in the tone that usually reduces Scarlett to despair. He is not in his happiest mood to-day. And Flora, without knowing it, is doing her utmost to aggravate him to madness by persistently keeping as close to Gretchen as circumstances will permit.

It is, indeed, with rapture he hails the approach of Brandy, who comes leisurely towards them across the lawn. He is not alone: the past week has given to the Towers two new guests, Kenneth Dugdale and Mr. Dinmont, a friend of Brandy's, and indeed, from old associations' sake, a friend of all the Tremaines.

He is young,—disgracefully young, he tells himself,—though not so boyish in appearance as Brandy. Indeed, he might be any age within the twenties, though only twenty-two. There is a solemnity about Mr. Dinmont, an amount of carefulness both in manner and in speech, that does honor

to his "head and heart," considering he is rich, and well-born, and without that "creeping horror," a guardian.

History declares he might have been even more endowed with worldly goods but for a fatal tendency towards practical joking, that, being put into practice in his fifteenth year, lost him many thousands. The thousands were his aunt's, the practical joke was quite his own.

Miss Jemima Dinmont was an elderly spinster of severe morals and small wit. Nowadays they say it is impossible to swear positively to any one's morals; but that Miss Jemima's common sense was of a low order I think there can be little doubt, when she expressed a desire to escort George Dinmont—then a lad—home from Eton.

Miss Jemima seldom made mistakes, but this was a mistake difficult to cap, as I believe few people knowing George Dinmont at that time would have elected to go on a journey with him. But Miss Jemima probably thought herself beyond fear. Afterwards all the Dinmonts were glad to remember that it was she herself who had proposed the journey, that no one had incited her to it or painted the expedition in glowing colors.

Miss Jemima met young George at the station, and, having saluted him and bought his ticket, they started on their ill-fated way towards home. At first Miss Jemima was genial, and George—who was nothing if not facetious—presently broke into a strain of reminiscences amusing, if not of a highly spiritual nature, that let her into a thing or two about school-boy life.

Perhaps these recollections were of a lively rather than an edifying description, because after a while Miss Jemima froze palpably; whereupon young George found himself, as he afterwards expressed it, "in the wrong box." Silence ensued, and both turned their attention upon the flying landscape.

So far things had gone unusually well, and might have ended with a mere reprimand on one side and some disgust on the other, had not Miss Jemima chosen this moment of *al* others to commit her crowning act of folly: she fell asleep!

When the Dinmonts heard this later on, they shook their heads dismally and asked each other solemnly, "What could she have expected?"

Yes, she fell asleep, and time began to hang heavy on

young George's hands. He yawned, he fidgeted; he cut a large hole in the new cloth cushions of the carriage; he scratched his name upon the door; he worried the tassel off the end of the piece of leather that helps to open the windows, and, in fact, did all that could possibly be expected of him in the course of ten short minutes.

Then he looked at Miss Jemima. She was sweetly sleeping. Her lips were apart; her head was thrown slightly backwards. A gentle snore proclaimed her in the arms of Morpheus. Her nephew sat for some time lost in admiration of this enchanting picture, and then—and *then*—he caught sight of the down upon her upper lip!

It was enough. Quick as lightning he drew from his pocket a piece of twine, three penknives, several apples, a few nails, a little box of matches, and a cork.

Cautiously he lit a match and applied it to the cork; the latter, as though in rich enjoyment of the situation, burned bravely and soon was black as could be desired. Then came the last act in the drama: George rose on tiptoe and applied the cork generously to Miss Jemima's lip. The down took to it kindly, and soon developed as fine a moustache as any young *attaché* might be proud of.

George, gazing at her in silent ecstasy, laid his hands upon his knees and bent almost in two in his violent efforts to restrain his unholy joy; whilst Miss Jemima slumbered on in blissful unconsciousness.

"And you never," said young George to an admiring audience later on, "saw such an upper lip for the purpose!"

Not yet altogether content with his work, this dutiful nephew next ornamented his sleepy aunt with bushy whiskers, and, as a delicate compliment to the present government, made her a present of a charming "imperial." He might, perhaps, have added a touch or two to her brows or the tip of her nose, but that just then a shrill whistle warned him his time was short; and Aunt Jemima, waking, with a final snort, declared "she never could sleep in those shaky trains," and told him his journey was almost at an end.

Then they steamed into the station, and George, bidding her a hasty farewell,—without trusting himself to look at her again,—sprang to the ground and fought his way through idlers and passengers, out of sight.

Miss *Jemima* descended slowly on to the platform and summoned a porter to see to her luggage. The man came, saw, and was conquered. He put his hand to his mouth, and, with a choking sound, fled! Several men did the same; until at length Miss *Jemima* found herself marching across the station through a delighted crowd neatly divided into two rows, who gave her as she reached the place of exit a parting cheer.

Her own footman, as he opened her carriage-door, grew first pale with fright, and then subsided into agonies of suppressed laughter, whilst the coachman on the box declared afterwards he was never so near apoplexy in his life.

Miss *Jemima*, all unconscious, though somewhat perplexed at the strangeness of things in general, stepped into her brougham and asked herself calmly what was the matter. Instinctively she raised the little mirror attached to the carriage, bent forward, and—saw!——

She never again spoke to that branch of the *Dinmonts*; and when some months later she died, George was not so much as mentioned in her will.

"But what's the odds," said young *Dinmont*, very philosophically, on the occasion, "as long as we're 'appy?"

Just now he does not look particularly happy as he walks through the grass beside *Brandy Tremaine*, but is evidently protesting anxiously against injustice done, whilst the latter is exploding with laughter.

"What's the joke, *Brandy*?" asks Jack *Blunden*, lazily raising himself on his elbow. "You will be ill if you conceal it much longer. Don't be selfish, dear boy: let us be partakers of your joy."

"It's only *Dandy's* last," says *Brandy*, still full of enjoyment (*Mr. Dinmont* is a "gallant plunger" and a Christian gentleman, but because his name happens to be *Dinmont*, and his garments irreproachable, it goes without telling that to all who know him his Christian appellation is simply "*Dandy*").

"It is only *Dandy's* last," says *Brandy*, whilst *Dandy* in the background glowers painfully. "He is so sentimental and so full of poetry!"

"I wouldn't make an ass of myself, if I were you," interposes *Mr. Dinmont*, wrathfully.

"I like that," says *Brandy*, with a fresh accession of mirth.

"Just wait till I tell my tale. We were walking along by the sea-shore, when some curlew flew over our heads, and Dandy said——"

"Don't believe him, Miss Tremaine," interrupts Dandy, angrily.

"Dandy said, in his most poetic tone, 'The *curlew* tolls the knell of parting day.' Ha-ha," says Brandy, laying down his head in a passion of laughter upon the window-sill inside which Dugdale sits, also openly amused.

"Well, any one might make a mistake," says Gretchen, holding out a friendly hand to Dinmont, who grasps it thankfully, "and all the world knows the difference between 'curlew' and 'curfew.' What a goose you are, Brandy! Sometimes I think you would laugh at a straw."

But Gretchen's kind defence rather falls to the ground, as all around her are giving way to open merriment.

"Oh! shade of Thomas Gray!" says Blunden. "I'd give up spouting if I were you, Dandy: it evidently doesn't agree with you. Try something else."

"Oh, I dare say," says Mr. Dinmont, justly incensed. "You're all very funny, of course, aren't you? No one doubts that; and any fellow, you know, can invent a story of another fellow, you know; that's simple; but I think I could invent a *good* story if I went about it at all."

"Do go about it," says Scarlett, the most generous encouragement in his tone. "Do, there's a good fellow. If you engage to make it half as amusing as Brandy's, we'll come in a body to hear it. There's a noble offer!"

"Shall we go for a walk?" asks Kitty, rising suddenly, in answer to a glance from Gretchen. "It is only half-past four, and tea will not be in the library until five. If you all wish it, we shall just have time to take a peep at the gardens."

"Will you come?" says Scarlett, in an undertone, turning to Gretchen.

She shakes her pretty head, and then says, gently, "I think not. I am a little tired, and—I always read to Mr. Dugdale for a short time about this hour. Go with the rest, and come in with them when tea is ready."

"I almost begin to envy Dugdale," says the young man, discontentedly, yet with an assumption of playfulness. He

has been so long her friend that now he finds it difficult to realize the fact that he is indeed her lover. As for Gretchen, the idea has never once occurred to her. To tell her that "little Tom Scarlett"—with whom she has gone nutting scores of times when they were boy and girl together—is madly in love with her, would be to cause her the most intense amusement.

"If you were an invalid, unable to go about, I would read to you too," she says, sweetly. Whereupon the young man tells her she is "an angel,"—foolishly, perhaps, but with the deepest sincerity.

Gretchen laughs, taps him lightly on the arm with her fan, and warns him he must not flatter, after which she accompanies him on his way to the gardens with the others, until she reaches the hall-door, where—having committed Dandy and Flora and Brandy to his special care, with a view to preventing bloodshed—she parts from him and goes in-doors.

Dugdale, having seen her pass with Scarlett, and believing her gone for the walk proposed by Kitty, has turned, with an impatient sigh, upon his weary couch, and is preparing to count the minutes that must elapse before the arrival of the welcome tea summons them to the house again, when the library door opens, and Gretchen comes in.

"Shall I read to you for a little?" she says, brightly, drawing near to him. "The others have all gone for a walk, so I have nothing to do."

"Oh, thank you! How very good of you!" said Dugdale, flushing. "But you must not, indeed. See how lovely the evening is. You really must not make yourself a prisoner for my sake."

"I am glad to stay," replies she, simply, sinking into a little cosy wicker chair beside him. "The evening is just a degree too lovely for me. I can't bear much heat; and August is evidently trying to atone for the miserable summer we have had. Besides, my mind is now at rest. Brandy and Flora cannot come to much grief while Tom Scarlett is with them. I told him to walk between them."

"A wise precaution."

"What shall I read?" asks Gretchen, glancing idly at the well-filled shelves around her.

"May I ask you to talk to me a little instead?" says Dug-

dale, with hesitation. "I have a slight headache, and I like to hear your voice."

"Now, I told you not to sit in the sun, did I not?" says Gretchen, with concern. "I knew it would make you feel ill; and this room is always so warm. Shall I put some eau de Cologne on your forehead? It will refresh you, and give you a little cold, shivery feel."

"I should like it so much," says Dugdale, gratefully, who would have said just the same about *assafoetida*, had she proposed laying it on his forehead with her own soft little hand. Opening a bottle that lies upon one of the tables, she applies the remedy carefully, barely touching him, so delicately her fingers move. Once they stray a little to brush back the hair that interferes with her gentle task, and the unwonted tenderness of the action, though slight, and born of the mere womanliness of her disposition, stirs his heart to its depths and creates in him a longing to let her know how sweet she is in his sight,—a longing, however, which he restrains. Of what avail to speak? How can the admiration of such as he is (however honest)—the admiration of an inert and useless mass—please her? Nay, might it not rather raise a feeling of repugnance even in that gentle breast, a shrinking from one doomed to spend the short time allowed him upon earth in forced inaction?

"Now are you better?" asks Gretchen, presently, in so hopeful and so anxious a tone that any man would have protested by all his gods he was *well*, rather than chagrin or disappoint her. Dugdale, of course, declares on the spot that even the last faint lingering throb has disappeared, and that never was there so wonderful a cure as she has effected in five minutes. Whereupon Miss Tremaine sits down, the scent-bottle still in her hands, and commences conversation.

"You heard that ridiculous story of Brandy's," she says. "I think it was all too bad for poor Dandy. But he will quote poetry, however wrongly. Do you like him? Is he not a nice boy?"

"Charming. He is very much attached to you, is he not?" Gretchen laughs.

"He could hardly exist unless he believed himself in love with some one," she says. "It is part of his life; and I am his *corps de réserve*. He only returns to his allegiance to

me when he has no one else to love. He has known me so long that he is perforce fond of me. Don't you think mere association creates liking? I do."

"I dare say. Has Scarlett known you a long time?"

"Oh, yes. Ever so long,—years and years. Tom and I are great friends."

"I should have thought him something nearer than a friend."

"Should you?" says Gretchen, opening her eyes. "Oh, no. We have known him all our lives. I am sure he will always be 'little Tom Scarlett' to us, in spite of his six feet and the fact that he is five years older than Kitty. What a foolish thought to enter your head! He is rather handsome, is he not?"

"Very handsome. No one could dispute it; and a good fellow, too. I was rather intimate with him for some months after Maudie married his cousin, Major Scarlett, and before—before——"

"Yes, we all like him very much," says Gretchen, with nervous haste.

"What was he saying to you just now when you laughed and tapped his arm with your fan?"

"When?"

"A few minutes ago. Before you all went away from the window."

"Then? No doubt some wretched nonsense," says Gretchen, evasively.

"Tell me what it was."

"But it was so silly."

"Never mind; tell me. I don't believe it was so silly as you say."

"Well, then, if only to prove you wrong, I will tell you. He said I was an angel," says Miss Gretchen, with a blush and a gay laugh. "Now confess yourself in fault."

But Dugdale does not so confess himself. He is, on the contrary, silent, and gazes at her curiously for a moment or two. Gretchen's blush dies away, and, with a slight but evident effort, she says,—

"He came over to-day to ask us to go to a picnic with his people and some others next Thursday."

"How very rash of him! He must know those infallible

Americans have predicted storms and all sorts of awful things for the beginning of September."

"Nevertheless we are bent on defying them. They must be wrong sometimes," says Gretchen. Then, after a little pause, she goes on: "My only regret about it is that I fear you will be very lonely all that day."

"I shall certainly miss you, if you mean that. But you must not worry about me. No doubt I shall pull through until your return. And, remember, one day without companionship is little for one who has been accustomed for months past to live entirely alone."

"Still, I wish you could have some one to amuse you."

"I shall amuse myself looking forward to the evening, when I shall expect you all to tell me everything that happened and all that was said worth hearing."

"I don't think you will have much to hear, at that rate," says Gretchen, with a smile.

"Promise to tell me all Scarlett says to you, for instance," says Dugdale, jestingly, yet with his eyes intently fixed upon her face.

"Would you call that 'worth hearing'?"

"I should."

"Then"—with an irrepressible laugh—"you have a higher opinion of Tom Scarlett's powers than I have. However, if it will interest you, you certainly shall hear all I can remember."

"That is a promise?" eagerly.

"Of course a promise," replies she, some faint wonder in her tone. Then the tea is brought, and all the others come straggling in, still intent upon the coming picnic.

"I adore picnics," says Brandy, who is feeling satirical. "They are the only opportunities one gets of eating unlimited flies. There are few things so nice as flies."

"Well, that's the worst of picnics," says Mr. Scarlett, gloomily, who is still consumed by jealousy. "They are so uncomfortable, and one never gets anything to eat."

"Oh, you forget," says Brandy. "Don't be ungrateful. How can one be hungry at a picnic? Why, if the worst comes to the worst one always has one's knees in one's mouth."

"Another of Brandy's clever remarks," says Miss Flora,

with a sneer, turning up her small nose even higher than Nature, who has been liberal in that respect, ever intended. "But it didn't come off, did it? You should say, 'Here you all laugh;' or, 'This is the point;'—or something."

"Where shall we have our picnic?—that is the point, I think," says Scarlett, with a view to preventing further discussion.

"Why not Uplands? It is a charming place, with such a pretty view."

"Yes, when one gets up to it. The last time I ventured there and reached the summit I was so depressed I longed for nothing but——"

"Death," says Brandy. "I remember it. I was with you."

"Then it is not to be wondered at," puts in Flora, viciously, if softly.

"Is not Uplands rather far away?" says Gretchen, gently; "and it certainly is mountainous. Why not try that wood near Myross?"

"That is almost as hilly a road, and not so pretty, I think."

"But nearer home; and one hates a long drive back when tired."

"Better to bear the ills we have than fly to others that we know not of," quotes Brandy. "Why didn't you say that, Dandy? It was quite in your line, and a splendid chance absolutely thrown away."

"What about the evening?" asks Scarlett, addressing Gretchen in a low tone, who is still sitting on the wicker chair near Dugdale. "Would you come to our place and have tea? We might afterwards, you know, get up a small dance in the hall."

"Oh, thank you, no: do not mention that," Gretchen replies, earnestly. "We must be home early: must we not, Kitty? There are many reasons."

Her eyes for an instant rest on Dugdale. How long the day will be for him, poor fellow, when they are all away!

"Tell you what," exclaims Sir John, with sudden and unlooked-for animation: "you all come and have your dinner in my grounds. They are near enough, and no hills to speak of. You shall have tea in gypsy fashion towards evening, and get home as early as ever you like. And—and I'll go home with you." With a faint laugh, and a

glance at Kitty, who is busy tracing a pattern on the back of Trimmer, her fox terrier.

"That will be quite too charming," says Gretchen, with a quick smile; and then they all say the same in different language, except Scarlett, who would have liked to drive her home to his mother's house through the cool night-air, and to have danced with her afterwards in a gay informal fashion in the old hall.

CHAPTER VI.

ROSALIND. "To you I give myself, for I am yours."—*As You Like It.*

So it arranges itself; and though during all the intervening days it pours, and thunders, and generally misconducts itself, until one wonders dismally whether such an awful rent in the clouds can ever be stitched up again, still on the morning of the eventful Thursday the weather, as though ashamed of its churlishness, clears up suddenly, and sends a brilliant sun to dry up all its tears. The day breaks upon the world bright and glorious, full of warmth and freshness and promises of good things to come.

Somewhat early in the afternoon Captain Scarlett, having deserted his mother's party, drives up to the Towers behind his irreproachable bays, and induces Gretchen in a weak moment to trust herself to his keeping and theirs. And presently all are gone, and a certain stillness covers the house; and Dugdale with a heavy heart lies motionless upon his couch, to count the hours till they return, and brood over his unhappy fate, and let a fruitless longing for what "might have been" make havoc of his peace.

Meantime the others are driving merrily on their road to Coolmore, and, passing through the entrance-gates, are glad to escape the hot pursuit of the sun and gain shelter beneath the branching trees.

Far away in the vast heavens pale clouds are sailing,—sailing into worlds unknown. Below, the scene is almost as fair: on each side stretch sloping lawns, green as emeralds,

far as the eye can see. To the right a broad river like a white ribbon runs restlessly between its sandy banks; upon its edge, stooping to drink, half a score of deer add life and beauty to the already perfect picture; whilst a little higher up the drooping flowers, faint with heat, lean over it, as though to catch a glance of "their own dear loveliness."

Coming quickly round a rocky corner studded with ferns, the Tremaines find themselves at the entrance to a piece of soft lawn, made circular by a band of giant oaks that have grown there of their own accord for generations. It is a favorite wood at Coolmore, a pretty freak of fanciful Nature, what the children would call a "veritable fairy's ball-room."

Everybody has arrived before them, and every one is very hungry. The history of one picnic is so exactly the history of every other picnic that one need hardly enlarge on this particular one. They all sit about in impossible attitudes and try to think they are graceful. All the men get as close to the women they most affect, as circumstances will permit; there is a blessed lack of formality; and there are unlimited flies in all the glasses. "On this occasion only" the salt is not forgotten, and no sugar falls into the lobster salad.

There are the usual number of heartaches; and Jealousy, in its green and ugly rags, stalks about rampant. Give me a picnic as the most promising thing on earth for the creation and promotion of quarrels of all sorts! Scarlett, who has got himself up in the very lightest of all possible tweed suits, with a view to furthering his cause and making himself irresistible in the eyes of his beloved, is utterly and openly wretched, because Gretchen in the goodness of her heart is listening with apparent interest to the animated conversation of a tall and lanky young man with a bright dark ugly face and one expressive eye; the other has withdrawn itself behind a green shade,—at least one charitably hopes so, though really whether it is there or elsewhere is a matter for speculation. To Scarlett, who persists in calling him "the man with the eye," in spite of the fact that he may be the man without it, he seems a very poor creature indeed. "Not a thing to recommend him, don't you know, and about the shabbiest old travelling-suit on him you ever saw in your life. I really think girls *like* fellows without legs and arms or any feature to speak of. I'm positive she is pitying him now

with all her might; and, if she only knew it, I dare say he had that eye gouged out in some disgraceful rowdy fight." So muses Tom Scarlett, wrathfully, whilst devouring his un-offending moustache.

Brandy is dividing his graceful attentions between a chicken pie and a Miss Lena Deverill, and just now is entreating her, in a tone almost pathetic in its sincerity, to try some of it, as it is "about the best thing going." Which speech hardly pleases Miss Deverill, who is a severely lovely young lady with a short nose and æsthetic tastes, who goes about with a little bit of faded heather or a mawkish yellow leaf between her fingers asking every one to see the beauty in it, and who evidently thinks *herself* the "best thing going," and takes it badly being ousted by a chicken pie!

Sir John Blunden has secured himself a place near Kitty; but Miss Tremaine has also secured herself a companion for her other side, to whom she is making herself intensely agreeable. Her smiles are no longer wholly for Sir John; her looks wander from him. Once or twice, so interested is she in her new friend, who is of the scientific order, that she has even failed to hear Sir John's voice when he has addressed her.

This sort of treatment is new to Blunden, who has been accustomed to think of Kitty as his own especial property and to believe firmly in her affection for him. It is quite three weeks since he told Arthur Blunden (who has gone away again for an indefinite period to some uninhabitable part of the globe, no one knows where) of his fixed determination to settle down and marry handsome Kitty Tremaine. But as yet he has not proposed; perhaps because he feels so sure of her, and of his own love for her; perhaps because things are so pleasant now, and if a change be made who shall say if things will ever be as pleasant again? perhaps because it is such a bore nowadays to take any decisive step, or to be much in earnest about anything.

To-day Sir John feels more in earnest than he has felt for years. Can he have mistaken her? Has he made too sure? At this moment it occurs to him with startling force that life without Kitty Tremaine will be a very poor thing indeed. When, therefore, Kitty has actually proved herself so engrossed by her new companion as to turn a deaf ear to his

third remark, Sir John loses patience, and, putting his glass in his eye, turns an indignant glance upon the man on the other side, and tells himself with some gusto that he is an "ill-looking brute," and wonders angrily "what Kitty can see in him."

He makes one more feeble effort at reassertion by asking her in a rather stern tone "if he can do anything for her;" and when she says "No, thanks very much," sweetly but absently, and with evident haste, he rises, and, crossing to where Tom Scarlett is glowering upon space, flings himself down beside him and says something about champagne.

"I can't say I see the fun that other people seem to see in picnics," says Scarlett, gloomily.

"They're a beastly nuisance; and one never knows whom one may meet," returns Blunden, with heartfelt meaning; whereupon they feel even more friendly towards each other than before, and grow sympathetic on the spot.

Dinner is at an end, and all have risen to their feet. Kitty, having tired of science, gives just one small glance in Sir John's direction, which in spite of pride and wounded affection brings him to her side at once. He comes,—slowly, it is true, but still he comes,—and Miss Tremaine acknowledges his approach with her brightest smile, which, however, is not reciprocated.

"You won't care to come for a walk with me, I suppose?" he says, coldly. "All the week I kept thinking that perhaps you might like to see the old ruin on the hill again,—there is a fine view from it,—and that you would like me to show it to you. But no doubt your scientific friend will be more at home there, and far more interesting than I should be. He'll be able to tell you all about it,—the proper dates, you know, and whether it is an Elizabethan, or a Norman, or a Gothic structure."

This elaborate piece of scathing sarcasm is delivered with much unction.

"How silly you are!" says Kitty, softly. "I had quite made up my mind to see the dear old ruin to-day; but if you won't take me I shall go with no one. Don't be unkind, Jack."

It is only on very rare occasions she makes use of his Christian name, and now he accepts her mention of it as an

apology for her late evil behavior, and grows instantly radiant.

"Do you mean that?" he asks, and is reassured by a swift but very friendly glance. "Come on, then," he says, eagerly: "let us get there before the others. But I think you needn't have been so awfully unkind all through dinner, you know."

So they walk away together through the rustling autumn leaves and snapping underwood towards the old haunt in question. And as they go a silence strange yet full of a rare content falls upon them. Sir John lights his cigar, Miss Tremaine plucks the stray wild grasses as she goes, but no word breaks the stillness of the evening as they pass by rippling streams, and under branching trees, through brake and fern, until they reach the summit of the hill. Once as they step across a tiny rivulet, a very baby of a stream, that full of glad song rushes babbling onwards through flowery meads straight to the arms of its mother the river, Sir John takes her hand to help her over it, and, having taken, retains it, until at length the ruins rise before them grand and stately even in decay.

Kitty, seating herself upon a huge stone, sighs gently and looks around her. Sir John, standing against the trunk of a tree, flings away the end of his cigar and looks at Kitty. The walk has brought a faint flush into her cheeks, a brightness to her eyes; a lurking softness curves the corners of her lips, making her perfect mouth even more lovable than usual. The evening is falling. Afar in the thicket a solitary bird gives forth its music, breaking into song half tinged with melancholy. Some sudden thought strikes Sir John: straightening himself, he goes up to Kitty and stands beside her.

She starts a little as he comes close to her, as one might whose thoughts were far away, and turns up her beautiful eyes to his.

"I thought you were going to speak to me," she says, as though in apology for the involuntary start.

"So I am," says Blunden, quietly. "I have been thinking, Kitty,"—taking his second cigar from his mouth and deliberately knocking the ash from it,—“that I should like to make you a present, if I was quite sure you would accept it."

"Be absolutely certain, then," says Miss Tremaine, without hesitation, all unconscious of what is coming. "I perfectly adore getting presents."

"You promise, then, to accept mine?"

"Indeed I shall,—if it is a nice one."

"It is, rather. I want to give you"—he waves his hand slightly towards the rich and glowing landscape that lies all round and far below them—"all this."

Kitty flushes crimson. She rises slowly to her feet, and, after one irrepressible glance, turns her face away, so that he can see only the clearly-cut profile.

"Well, that is a present!" she says, in a low tone, with a rather nervous laugh. "It is not every day one gets an estate thrown at one's head."

"At one's heart," corrects he. "There is only one trifling obstacle in the way of your accepting it——"

"And that is——"

"Its present master. If you do consent to take it, I am afraid you must take me with it." He has spoken without any appearance of haste, but now he pitches away the unoffending cigar and moves so that in spite of her late effort to avoid his scrutiny her eyes must meet his. "Look here, Kitty," he says: "I like you better than any woman I ever met. Will you marry me?"

"What a proposal!" returns she, with a little pale smile. "It quite destroys all one's previous notions of the fitness of things. I certainly thought, when you did make up your mind to lay your hand and fortune at my feet, you would have done it in some more orthodox fashion."

"You thought I should propose, then?"

"I knew it,"—calmly,— "I felt sure of it." She is piqued at the apparent coolness of his manner.

"And—did you feel equally sure you should say 'Yes' when the time came?"

"I have not said yes yet," replies she, with undiminished calm.

Sir John regards her curiously. There is surprise, disquietude, even admiration, in his glance, and perhaps a little offence.

"I wonder if you care in the very least for me?" he asks, presently.

"I wonder if you care for me?"—hastily.

"I think you may be utterly sure of that," replies he, with some warmth. "There is nothing on earth more certain. Up to this I have not been an enthusiastic admirer of the marriage-state. It is a very powerful inducement indeed that has made me not only willing but anxious to become 'Benedick the married man.'"

"Is it in such a light—as a grievance—you regard marriage?" asks she, a sudden gleam in her large dark eyes.

"Marriage in general; not marriage with you."

"You flatter me,"—with some faint bitterness. "Are you quite sure, Jack, you are not asking me to marry you because you feel it your duty to settle down, and because I have a handsome face?"

"If you are going into morals," says Jack, "you will floor me at once." I fancied"—reproachfully—"you knew me well enough to understand that duty and I are two. I hate the very sound of it. I protest I never yet did a dutiful action without repenting it bitterly afterwards. As to settling down, I am not dreaming of doing that. You know you wouldn't like it, and I don't see why a fellow can't enjoy himself quite as much after his marriage as before, if—er—people are only reasonable. And I should like you, Kitty, to take as much good out of your life as it is capable of affording you."

"I dare say I should be able to manage that," says Kitty, more mildly.

"Then as to the eventual ownership of Coolmore,—why, if I never marry there is always Arthur. However you may doubt my affection for—for others, you must at least believe in my regard for him; and if he should inherit the estate, dear old boy, I only hope it may do him good. With reference to your other question, I dare say there is something in it. I detest ugly women, as you know, and you, I think, have quite the most beautiful face in the world. That is certainly one reason why I love you."

"And yet"—wistfully—"it is quite ten minutes ago since we began this conversation, and until now you have never mentioned the word 'love.'"

"While you"—quickly—"have never mentioned it at all."

"How could I? I was waiting to be questioned. You

said, 'Will you marry me?' You never said, 'Do you love me?' and, what is far, far worse, you did not say, 'I love you.'"

"Perhaps it was because I saw so little necessity for saying it that I forgot it. You must know—you have known for a long time, Kitty—how dearly I love you. I confess I have spooned other women,—have, perhaps, made a point of telling them I adored them, simply because I didn't, but believe me now when I say no woman ever held my heart in her keeping except you. And it is because the feeling I entertain for you is so different from that I have felt for those others that I have seemed cold to you."

"I accept your apology," says Kitty, smiling until her lovely lips part company, as though to show the white and even teeth within. "It is a very honeyed one, and—I like honey. Yet forgive me that I had a fancy to be wooed as other women are."

A slight moisture dims her eyes, the hand that rests in his trembles, a quiver supplants the smile upon her lips.

"You are unlike all other women," says Blunden, with sudden and passionate tenderness, that, coming from one usually so *nonchalant* and careless, seems doubly earnest. "You are far above the very best I ever met. My sweet,—my darling,—never again, however silent I may be on the subject, doubt my love for you. And you, Kitty, tell me with your own lips that you return my love."

"I have loved you a long time," whispers Kitty, in soft lingering tones that only reach his ear as he stoops to hear them.

"Do you know you have not accepted me yet?" says Sir John, presently, when they have partially come to their senses, and to a tardy recognition of the fact that after all the earth has not given place to heaven.

"No? Then I sha'n't commit myself any farther," says Miss Tremaine, with a gay laugh. "They say it is a wise thing always to leave one's self a loop-hole by which to escape. I shall certainly not bind myself by any more rash promises. I consider I have said quite enough for one day."

* * * * *

Down in a mysterious hollow Sir John has tea for them, as

he promised ; after which they all drive back to their several homes, beneath a sky studded with early stars, like the azure gown of a court dame rich with jewels, the Tremaines reaching the Towers rather later than they had anticipated.

Gretchen, running through the hall, hat in hand, goes straight to the library and up to Dugdale, who with glad eyes flings down his book and holds out his hand to her.

"What a day it has been !" he says. "What a month,—a year ! Welcome home again."

"Ah ! you have been lonely," Gretchen answers, with contrition. "I knew it. Several times to-day I said to myself, 'How I wish he had some one to speak to !' It was most unfortunate that papa and mamma should have gone to the Mallocks this week."

"You thought of me, then, even in the midst of your amusement ?"

"Very often," says Gretchen, with an earnestness very sweet but unconsciously cruel. "I felt you would miss us terribly."

"Yes, I missed you terribly." There is the least possible emphasis on the "you." "You were good to come to me so soon. I heard the hall-door open, and knew your step as you ran along the hall. Well,—and you enjoyed yourself?"

"Immensely. It was quite a charming picnic, and no mistakes were made."

"And now for your promise," says Dugdale.

"What a horrible memory you have ! I—I don't think I spoke to Tom Scarlett all through dinner," replies she, shaking her head, and making a mean effort at evasion.

"And afterwards?"—remorselessly.

"Afterwards——" She hesitates. "Tom is a very silly person," she says, at last, in an apologetic tone. "I don't think it is quite fair. Mr. Dugdale,"—putting out her hand with a charming glance full of entreaty,—"*absolve me from that promise.*"

"I absolve you," says Kenneth, slowly, taking her hand. "You are right: it would not be fair to Scarlett. Nevertheless I think I showed wisdom in what I said of him the other day."

"No, it is only nonsense," persists Gretchen, gravely. "You must not believe that."

"Why do you call me Mr. Dugdale? Your mother and Kitty both call me Kenneth."

"They both have known you so much longer."

"That is a mistake. You have seen me oftener in these last few weeks than they have seen me in their lives."

"If it will please you," says Gretchen, gently, and rather shyly, "I too will call you Kenneth."

"Thank you," replies the young man, in a low voice, more replete with gratitude than the occasion altogether requires. He is still holding her hand. The lamps upon the centre-table are burning low; the curtains are drawn; perhaps he can hardly see very distinctly in the dull soft light, because presently Gretchen, raising her eyes, finds he is gazing at her very intently. She colors, and laughs a little.

"Have you never heard how rude it is to stare?" she says, drawing her fingers gently but with energy from his.

"Forgive me. I was not conscious of my rudeness," returns he, slowly: "I was only thinking. That is the dress you wore when first I saw you, is it not? And that is the hat. Am I right?"

"Quite right. Your memory on the occasion is very flattering. It is a favorite gown of mine, as gray, I think, becomes me."

"I suppose most things become you," says Dugdale, seriously.

"That is the sort of thing any one might say," returns she, with a slight but disdainful shrug of her shoulders.

What answer Dugdale might have made to this half-petulant speech can never now be known, as Brandy, entering the room at this instant in somewhat noisy fashion, puts an end to the discussion.

Seeing Gretchen, he executes a small war-dance on the threshold, to show his surprise at her presence on the scene, and then gives way to speech.

"Well," he says, with feigned horror, "of all the desperate flirts I ever met with, you, Gretchen, are the worst. I am sadly disappointed in you. Not content with driving Scarlett to despair, and Dinmont to the verge of suicide, with reducing a dark and melancholy stranger, with only one eye,—who looked like Terry's 'arrangement in lampblack,'—to the verge of imbecility, you come in here now to try to destroy

Dugdale's peace of mind. But I'll stand by you, Dugdale; so don't give in. I won't see you slaughtered without at least giving you a word of warning."

"Brandy, you've been dining," says Miss Gretchen, saucily, and, putting her brother aside, makes her escape from the room.

Not until Sir John, who returned with them, has made his tardy adieux and finally departed for the night, does Kitty take her mother into her confidence and relate to her the principal event of the day—to her. Mrs. Tremaine in her heart is glad of the news,—charmed; it has put an end to an anxiety that troubled and perplexed her; but, mindful of the lecture delivered on Kitty's refusal of old Lord Sugden, she refrains from too open a manifestation of pleasure. She kisses her daughter warmly, and says one or two correct things, with a suppressed sigh of pretended resignation.

"I am glad for your sake," she says, meekly. "But, dear Kitty, a title always counts."

"You mean Lord Sugden?" returns Kitty, readily. "Yes, of course you would regret that. But he was old, you know; and remember how ugly he was, and how good Jack is to look at."

"My dear child, earls are never ugly," says Mrs. Tremaine; but she smiles as she says it; and Kitty knows she is gratified more than she cares to confess with the news just brought her. How glad all women are to marry their daughters, how sorry to wed their sons! "Shall I tell your father, or should you prefer telling him yourself?"

"You can tell papa," says Kitty; "and say also that Jack is coming over to-morrow morning to speak to him. Good-night, mamma. I want to find Gretchen: I have not told her yet." She kisses her mother again, and, having received an injunction not to sit up too late, takes her departure.

CHAPTER VII.

"A dram of sweets is worth a pound of sorrow."

SPENSER.

"I WANT to speak to you, Gretchen," she says, a few minutes later, standing on the threshold of the door that divides their bedrooms, and that as a rule stands open.

"Then come in," says Gretchen, gladly; "and do shut the door behind you, Kitty. You look important; and to talk comfortably with a dark gulf yawning behind one is impossible."

Kitty closes the door, and, going up to Gretchen, draws her down on the sofa beside her.

"I want to tell you something," she says, with curious diffidence, not so much taking Gretchen's hand as slipping her own into it. There is a hesitation in her manner foreign to it,—a want of confidence. She had felt no nervousness when speaking to her mother, but now that it comes to making her confession to Gretchen a new and strange emotion overpowers her. A faint choking sensation in her throat compels her to pause as though for breath; and Gretchen, who is blessed with the quick sensibility that makes the joys and griefs of others as our own, tightens her fingers upon hers, and says, in her gentlest tone,—

"You need tell me nothing, dearest: I know all about it. When you returned from your walk this afternoon I raised my head by chance just as he was handing you your tea, and,"—with a little laugh,—“though I have never been engaged, I knew perfectly well all in one moment how it was with you.”

"And how was it?"

"Sir John had just asked you to be his wife, and you had said yes. I knew it by the way he looked at you and you at him. There was something in both your eyes I had never seen there before."

"You are a witch," says Kitty, smiling too. "Yes, it is all true."

"And you are happy, darling?"

"Very—very,"—somewhat dreamily.

Gretchen, looking at her, ponders for a little, and then says,—

"Of course I won't ask you what he said, dear; I suppose that no one would quite like to tell that. But was he nice, Kitty?"

"Yes," says Kitty; and then there is a pause. "I must tell you about it, Gretchen," she says, at length, a touch of desperation in her tone. "I don't mind saying it to you, but—but I think he seemed a little too sure of my answer." The hot blush that accompanies these words belies the assertion that she "doesn't mind," and betrays the fact that, but for the uncontrollable longing to open her heart to some one, the confession would never have been made.

"I think that is the most natural thing in the world," replies Gretchen, quietly. "Of course he knew you would accept him. He understood perfectly you were not the sort of girl to smile upon his attentions for so long without meaning to say yes. I myself despise a woman who leads a man to propose to her, merely for the gratification of her own vanity, and so, I am sure, does he. I really think," says Gretchen, warming to her work, "he paid you a very high compliment when he showed himself sure of your consent."

"Do you, Gretchen?" asks Kitty, wistfully.

"Yes, I do,"—stoutly. "And I think, too, it was very honest of Sir John not to pretend to have doubts on the subject. I think even better of him in consequence." Then, impulsively, "What beautiful eyes you have, Kitty! If I were a man I should love you for them alone."

Every good woman likes a compliment. At this allusion to her eyes Kitty smiles and brightens perceptibly for a moment, after which she relapses into her former depression.

"That is not all. There was another thing," she says, doubtfully. "He had spoken to me for quite twenty minutes, and I had accepted him, and all that, before—before he kissed me."

"Do you know, Kitty, you surprise me?" says Gretchen, with much gravity. "Would you have him kiss you just at first, all in a hurry, before you had time to collect yourself? I think he behaved most delicately. I admire him more and

more.. And, besides,—certainly no one has ever yet proposed to me," says Gretchen, hopefully,—“but perhaps they all behave like that.”

“Charley Dyneford didn’t,” says Kitty, shaking her head. “You remember I told you about him. He wanted to kiss me even *before* he proposed.”

“I always thought that Mr. Dyneford must have been a very rude young man,” says Gretchen, with decision, determined to uphold her argument at all hazards.

“Well, he really wasn’t,” Kitty answers, with palpable regret. At this moment she would have been glad to believe Charley Dyneford “a rude young man.” “He was very gentle, and always as he ought to be.”

“I much prefer Jack’s conduct,” says Gretchen, unflinchingly.

“Perhaps you won’t when I tell you more,” goes on Kitty, with some nervousness. “When at last he did kiss me, he did it suddenly, and without asking my permission.”

“I should think not, indeed,” says Gretchen, abandoning instantly and with the most glaring audacity the support of modesty. “To ask your permission when you had just told him with your own lips you would be his wife! I never heard of such a thing, my dear Kitty; no, neither in prose nor poetry. I’m sure I hope no one will ever ask *my* leave to kiss me, because I should feel it my duty to say no; and I might be sorry ever afterwards.”

At this they both laugh. And then Kitty says,—

“I wish I could be quite sure he loves me with all his heart.”

“Then *be* sure,” returns Gretchen, earnestly. “When I had guessed the truth, I could not help watching you both, to see how—how things would go on, you know. And in the drawing-room to-night I saw when you spoke how he grew suddenly silent, as though he should listen to your voice. When you moved, his eyes followed you; and when you laughed, he looked as if he should like to get up that very moment and kiss you on the spot. Kitty,” says Gretchen, solemnly, “I am absolutely certain he adores you!”

“Oh, Gretchen, what a darling you are!” exclaims Kitty, with a sudden passion of gratitude. “How shall I thank you? You have almost freed me from thoughts that wor-

ried and tormented me. Yes, they were foolish thoughts, and I was wrong to doubt." Laying her head on Gretchen's shoulder, she bursts into tears, and sobs unrestrainedly for a few minutes, with Gretchen's arms around her.

"It is only——" she falters, presently, making a desperate effort to control her emotion.

"I know," says Gretchen, tenderly: "you are crying because you are so happy: is not that it? Joy can claim tears as well as sorrow. And I think it is quite the sweetest thing you could do."

Perhaps Gretchen herself hardly understands her own meaning, but Kitty accepts her sympathy and sobs on contentedly. She might, indeed, be crying now, but that a low knock at the door arouses them.

"Never mind, Cole," says Gretchen, addressing the maid outside on the landing. "You need not wait. I shall do Miss Tremaine's hair to-night, and she will do mine."

Whereupon Cole, obedient,—albeit devoured with curiosity,—departs.

"Now sit down," says Gretchen, pushing Kitty gently into a seat before a glass, "and let me brush your hair. What lovely hair! It is like silk or satin, only prettier than either."

"What a lover you would make!" returns Kitty, with a faint smile.

When the hair is brushed and rolled into a loose coil behind her head, Gretchen, sinking on her knees beside her sister, says, coaxingly,—

"And when is it to be, Kitty?—I mean, when will Sir John take you away from us?"

"He spoke of the end of November, and said something about wintering in Rome."

"Only a few months; such a very few! And are you really going to be married, my dear, dear Kitty, and am I going to lose you? Do you remember, darling, how we learned our first prayers together,—and our lessons,—and how we were always praised and blamed together?"

"No, no. The blame was always mine, the praise yours. Gretchen, why do you speak to-night of the old fond memories?"

"Because they seem so close to me and yet so near their

end. It may sound selfish, darling, but I can't help wondering how I shall manage to live without you."

"You sha'n't manage it,"—quickly. "You shall come to stay with me; and then you shall marry some great duke (only he will never be great enough for you), and live always near me,"—caressing with loving fingers the soft fair head lying on her lap. "Do you know I look forward to the time when you will come to me as a guest in my own house with almost greater joy than I do to anything else? Now, Gretchen, if you cry I shall be angry, and I shall certainly begin all over again myself, and then my eyes will be red to-morrow, and I shall tell Jack the cause of it, and he will give you such a scolding as you never got in all your life before."

"I think I should like to sleep with you to-night, Kitty," says Gretchen, tearfully, whereat Kitty—whose turn it is now to adopt the *rôle* of comforter—laughs gayly, and, giving her a hearty hug, assures her she would not part from her to-night for love or money, and presently they are both asleep, clasped in each other's arms, resembling

A union in partition,—
Two lovely berries moulded on one stem;
So, with two seeming bodies, but one heart.

CHAPTER VIII.

"We know each other's faces: for our hearts,—
He knows no more of mine than I of yours;
Not I of his, my lord, than you of mine."

KITTY'S engagement makes little difference in the household. Sir John has been coming and going so incessantly for weeks that now his more frequent visits cause no change, and hardly any comment. Every one treats him as though he were a second Brandy; and Brandy treats him as though he were indeed a brother,—a considerably younger brother, —giving it as his opinion that Blunden is a "jolly good fellow all round." Mr. and Mrs. Tremaine are quite satisfied on all points. Gretchen is sympathetic, and even Flora has

been graciously pleased to say a few cautious words in his favor.

"But," says the youngest Miss Tremaine, quoting her nurse, "'If you want to know me, come live with me;'" and"—in a darkly mysterious tone—"we have none of us lived with Sir John yet." Whereupon Brandy says, "he hopes not," in a voice severe but significant; and Mrs. Tremaine despatches Flora on some impossible mission.

But even Flora's awful insinuation fails to damp Kitty's spirits, who is happy and content, Sir John's behavior ever since the memorable Thursday being all that the most exacting could require. Dugdale too has, of course, been taken into confidence, and has said all the charming things one generally does say on such occasions, whether one means them or not.

It is now October,—dreary, damp, and cold.

"When great leaves fall, then winter is at hand;" and now in truth the leaves are falling, and flowers are dead, and the cruel cutting wind speeds madly over barren lawns and loveless woods and colorless plains, striking terror to the hearts of shivering birds.

Dugdale has made several faint efforts to leave his present kindly quarters and go home, but the attempts have been pooh-poohed and set aside with determination by every member of the family. He has had rather a troublesome cough of late, and Mrs. Tremaine has nursed him tenderly herself, and done for him all that mother might do for son. Indeed, so much has his helplessness—and perhaps his beauty—gained on all hearts at the Towers that his talk of departure has been sneered down by them with a will.

It may be that they have not found it a very difficult task to persuade him to remain. Long since he has discovered, and confessed to his inmost self, that to be where Gretchen is, to him is happiness. But keenest pleasure borders upon pain; and for all the hours of sweetness gained when in her presence he pays an exorbitant price when her absence makes itself felt.

"Sorrow breaks seasons and reposing hours,
Makes the night morning, and the noontide night."

And when night falls, and silence reigns, and hope lies

bleeding,—when all things stand out plainly as they are, and kind deception flies, and the barrenness and loneliness of his life betray themselves in all their hideous nakedness,—then it is that despair conquers him, and his heart cries aloud in its passionate vain regret.

As love has been forbidden him, why has he been permitted to love,—to centre every thought upon one object with all the fervor and intensity of a happier man? Each hour of the day he sees her, hears her voice, feels, it may be, the cool touch of her beloved hand as she arranges his pillows, and marks with greedy eyes the gentle smile that always lights her face as she draws near him.

There is another—even a deeper—grief than the knowledge that he can never be more to her than he now is, that lies hidden in his breast, and that he hardly dares to drag from its hiding-place or let his secret love dwell upon. It is a belief he shrinks from, although hour by hour it grows stronger within him. Why had she blushed yesterday when he made that little foolish speech, half fanciful, half tender? Why had that faint look of distress crossed her face last Monday when he spoke again of his return to Laxton? Can it be possible that, had fate proved less unkind, she might—might—

It is this trouble that overpowers all others,—the thought that he need not always have been indifferent to her, the intolerable fancy that he might perhaps have been allowed to win her, had he been as other men are. He has grown paler, thinner, more silent, of late,—more feverishly restless in Gretchen's absence, more desperately though secretly jealous of Scarlett's constant visits. Yet so strongly riveted is the chain that binds him to the Towers that he dares not break it,—to fly from a passion that threatens to wreck the little peace that still remains to him.

* * * * *

It is the 31st of October,—Allhallow e'en,—and Flora's birthday. Flora (according to Brandy) has been born at least half a century behind her time, and is eminently old-fashioned,—a small being devoted to bygone ways and manners, one holding in highest reverence the games and customs of our forefathers.

Therefore she has decreed that to-night shall be kept, as in ancient days, with burning of nuts and roasting of apples, and such like,—all to take place in the library, for Kenneth's benefit, who is a wonderful favorite with her. There was, indeed, some talk about the dropping of lead through a wedding-ring,—whereby fortunes may be told; but mamma has objected strenuously, and put her veto against the use of lead in the library.

"And you will let us have a big cake, won't you, now, Cookie?" asks Miss Flora, seductively, regarding Cook with an anxious eye.

"Certainly, Miss Flora."

"And you will put a ring in it, won't you, Cookie?"—with increasing servility.

"You may bet your life on it, Miss Flora."

"And don't you hope I'll get it, Cookie? I ought, you know, because it is my birthday," explains Flora, with such an amount of earnestness as would lead one to suppose it is the dream of her life to be wedded before her sisters.

"I'm a'most *shore* you'll get it," says Cook, comfortably, who is not proof against Flora's charm of manner and tender familiarity of address.

"Cookie, you're a pet," says Miss Flora, with sad lack of dignity but much *bonhomie*; whereupon Cook smiles benignly, and gives her a jam tart originally meant for her own special delectation.

"The sun will not be seen to-day;
The sky doth frown and lour."

In very truth, the day is unpropitious. Sullen clouds chase one another across the steel-gray firmament and shed frowns instead of tears upon the patient earth; great passionate bursts of rain (that rage like angry children in their wrath) fling themselves against the window-panes and make a dismal patter on the balconies outside.

But as evening falls it calms, growing less and less vehement, until at last the storm ceases, and mad Boreas, tired of wandering, sinks to rest within his rock-bound cave.

"Expect an avalanche presently," says Gretchen, entering the library, where Dugdale lies, and going up to the fire. Dinner is over, and Flora's festivities are about to begin. "We are all coming to celebrate Flo's birthday—and Allhal-

low e'en—by burning nuts here." She smiles at him through the semi-darkness that encloses her slight figure as though it were a veil.

"Are you the herald?"

"Yes. Presently they will follow. There was a preliminary dispute between Brandy and Flora, so I slipped away."

"It was good of you to slip in this direction."

"Shall we all be too much for you? You know how Flora laughs, and how impossible it is for Brandy to be silent for two minutes together. Do you think you will be able to bear their noise?"

"I love their noise," replies he, honestly. And then they all come trooping in, Sir John and Kitty a little in the rear, as may be imagined,—because of a tender hand-pressure, or, it may be, a caress, the sweeter because stolen.

"Mamma is reading 'Ariadne,' and is so entranced she could not be induced to stir," says Kitty, generally.

"Never mind; I'll chaperon Flora," declares Brandy. "It is her own night; so I shall lay myself out to take care of her and see she does not fall into the fire, or otherwise injure her little self. Children are so careless!"

As Flora scorns to take notice of this leading remark, silence ensues.

Every one feels it is Flora's turn to speak, and her refusal to take up the gauntlet so delicately thrown leads them to believe she has at last "caved in."

"Flora's and Gretchen's birthdays come almost together," says Kitty,—“yours on the 31st, Flo, and Gretchen's on the following 7th. It is funny, is it not?"

"Is it?" says Brandy. "I always think it is rather hard upon the governor. Now, you and I, Kitty, behaved much more respectably: we allowed him time to forget one misfortune before reminding him of another."

"I don't think much of papa's presents," says Flora, with some disgust. "When I said to him this morning, 'Papa, dear, I am thirteen to-day: what are you going to give me?' he said, 'My dear, why will you refresh my memory about one of the unluckiest days of my life?' and gave me half a sovereign! I think there is nothing so small or so mean as a half-sovereign," says Flora. "I should much rather have none."

"I entirely agree with you," says Brandy: "so you may as well hand it over at once." As he speaks, he extends a large palm well opened.

"No, I shall give it in charity," says Flora, so demurely, so devoutly, that they all laugh.

"Never mind," says Flora, gayly. "I am determined to enjoy myself in spite of everything. I hate going to bed early, and mamma says I may sit up to-night until I have burned every nut on this dish: so I shall have a real lovely time."

"I should think you would," says Dinmont, gazing expressively at the huge dish of hazel-nuts indicated by Flora. "And all to yourself, too! You'll be up all night, I shouldn't wonder."

"I shall have even a better time on *my* birthday," says Gretchen: "I shall go to a ball. I must say, Kitty, I think it was a very delicate attention on the part of the Potters to give their dance on the 7th."

"Yes, if they knew anything about it," says Brandy. "But at least one thing may be gained. As it is a let-out for young Potter's coming of age, you and he can have one thought in common. So nice to be *en rapport* with young Potter!"

"I should think," says Dinmont, gloomily, "you and young Potter would open the ball."

"Who are the Potters?" asks Dugdale, suddenly rousing himself from a reverie.

"Very shoddy sort of people who have settled in the county, and who are going to entertain it, 'with a view to compelling its good word,'" says Brandy. "They aren't much, you know, and they haven't a grandfather between 'em; but that's rather fashionable nowadays, and don't count much. The old chap declares he is a Conservative (though any one can see at a glance he isn't): so the governor says we are to go to his ball,—as a support, I suppose, to the good cause."

"I am very much obliged to papa," says Gretchen. "A ball is a ball, and I love dancing."

"Do you?" says Kenneth, who is listening to her. "You dance well?"

"Beautifully," returns she, with a low soft laugh,—“like

a sylph, or like Terpsichore herself, or anything else full of grace and vivacity."

"I can believe it," says Dugdale, with all sincerity. "By the by, before you start, on the night of this ball, will you let me have a little peep at you? I am a devout believer in 'beauty adorned,' and I should like to see how you look when robed for conquest."

"Very well, you *shall* see," says Gretchen. "That is a promise; and one"—smiling—"I sha'n't ask you to absolve me from this time."

"Now let us begin," says Blunden, picking carefully two of the largest nuts and placing them on the bar. "Only one minute allowed in which to make up one's mind as to who is to burn with who. I have a wonderful amount of brain-power,—as I am sure you will admit when I tell you mine is made up already. Here is I, and here is her! Let no one come within a quarter of a mile of me and my beloved, or I shall dispense punishment with the poker."

"Are we to tell the names of those we choose?" asks Brandy.

"Certainly not,—under pain of death."

"That's the worst of being engaged," says Flora, regarding Sir John with a pitying eye. "Now, every one knows exactly who *you* are burning yourself with. There is no secret about *your* nuts."

"So much the better: I hate underhand ways."

At this moment Parkins enters with the tea, and looks longingly at the unlighted lamps.

"No, Parkins, not yet," says Kitty, answering his unspoken thought. "Lay the tea-things over there, and we will ring when we want more light."

"Captain Scarlett is in the drawing-room, miss. Shall I—"

"Oh, yes, send him in here," says Gretchen. "Tell Captain Scarlett we are in the library, Parkins, and that we shall be very pleased to see him."

"Thank you very much," says Scarlett himself, emerging from the gloom that surrounds the doorway. "It is good of you to admit me to these solemn rites at all: but it is doubly good of you, Gretchen, to say you will be pleased to see me."

"Oh, the treacherous darkness!" says Gretchen, laughing and blushing, though nobody can see the soft color in her cheeks except Kenneth, who is nearest to her.

"Kitty, how badly you are behaving!" says Sir John at this moment, pointing to Kitty's nut, which is blazing, but has jumped away a little from its companion and is now emitting angry scolding noises. Even as he speaks, the flame dies away, and the blackened nut with a final leap returns to its lover's side and settles down there comfortably.

"That means quarrels, and separations, and a grand making up at the end," says Flora, oracularly. "It isn't as bad as if she had gone off altogether."

"Well, no, it is *not*," acquiesces Sir John, meekly.

"Look at me: am I not an example?" says Gretchen, discontentedly. "See how I have burned away, slowly, methodically, without a single break, in a most exemplary and"—with a sigh—"humdrum fashion."

"Mark how Gretchen pines for the broils and turmoils of married bliss," says Brandy. "I really think she has a hankering for the 'roses and rapture of vice' as well as the worst of us. Never mind, Meg; you'll get 'em, my dear, take my word for it."

"I don't think so," replies she. "Such extreme tranquillity denotes, I am sure, a life of single blessedness. I shall probably die an old maid. And that will be horrid: won't it?" says Gretchen, feelingly.

No one answers her, but two pairs of eyes rest upon her simultaneously as she ceases to speak,—one pair with deep sadness, the other with rising hope.

"Awfully horrid," says Brandy, who, like Signor Benedick, "will still be talking." "If I were you I should at once take steps to prevent so fearful a calamity. It seems to me—— Oh, hang it all," says Brandy, indignantly, "I sha'n't try my fortune any more; there,"—pointing to the bar,—"that's the fifth girl that's deserted me since I began."

"And no wonder, too," says Flora, disparagingly.

"Why that scornful speech?" demands her brother, growing keen as he scents battle on the breeze. "Explain yourself, Flora, I entreat."

"Five young ladies," interrupts Sir John, anxious to prevent the coming explanation. "Brandrum, I shouldn't have

suspected you of such baseness: you make me blush. Why, you are a regular Turk, a Henry the Eighth, a veritable Don Juan. We shall have to leave the room if you don't mend your ways."

"Don't mind him," says Flora; "take no notice of him. Don't imagine he has a sweetheart anywhere: it is all make-believe."

"And this is my reward," murmurs Brandy, sadly, "for all the time and instruction I have wasted on you."

"Instruction, indeed!" says Miss Flora. "I only wish — Ah!"—with a little scream, as one of the nuts bounds from its resting-place with an explosive fizz right into the middle of the fire: "there, now, I think,"—turning to Dinmont, who is sitting beside her, with her heart so full of reproach as to obliterate all fear of discovery—"you need not have treated me like that."

"Ah!" says Brandy, instantly: "so Dandy was your young man, was he?"

"No, he wasn't," returns she, her face crimson; at which they all laugh.

"Well, I think I ought to have been," says Dandy, good-naturedly, "as I have been burning you for the last half-hour."

"My chosen won't light at all: is that a bad sign?" asks Scarlett, anxiously, who is meanly trying to coax a refractory nut into a blaze with a long slip of lighted paper.

"Very," answers Gretchen, laughing; "the worst. She evidently doesn't care in the very least for you. Discard her, and try your luck with some one less heartless."

"That is good advice, if I could follow it. But perhaps I like my indifferent love better than any other, even though she be heartless."

The rest are all talking; only Kenneth on his couch is listening curiously to their dialogue. It is quite impossible for him not to listen, as Gretchen is sitting on the low chair near him which she almost always occupies.

"Perhaps after a time," says Scarlett, looking into her eyes instead of at the fire, where his fate stands,—as light a brown as when first placed near it,—“my own warmth may kindle some faint returning heat in her.”

"I doubt it. See how obstinately cold she looks."

"She does indeed. Nevertheless I shall wait," says he, with a good deal of doggedness and a certain earnestness of manner that awakes surprise in her breast.

"Positively you are taking it to heart. How superstitious!" she exclaims, with a little smile utterly devoid of suspicion.

"Take another scrap of paper," advises Flora, "and just touch it again. It must light soon; and at all events it is your last chance."

"I'll try it," says Scarlett, taking another spill from the mantel-piece.

"I shouldn't do that," remarks Gretchen, contemptuously. "What! accept an unwilling affection?"

"You said a moment since I had taken this foolish game to heart. You were right: I have. I confess in this instance I should prefer an unwilling affection to none."

"I do not envy it to you," says Gretchen, shaking her head.

"I wish some one would tell a story," exclaims Flora, vivaciously, who is now tired of burning and eating her nuts; "a nice story."

"All about bogies, and blood and murder, and ghosts coming to one's bedside at night and laying a clammy hand upon one's brow, and telling one to 'come along o' me,' like the Bobbies: that's the sort of thing Flora loves," says Brandy.

"No, no," cries Flora, hastily, casting a nervous glance behind her. "Anything but that. Not that it frightens me: only I don't think I quite like it. Besides, they are all nonsense and quite untrue, those stories."

"Not at all," declares Brandy. "I know several racy ones, perfectly authenticated. I shall now tell you the one about the old lady who was murdered in cold blood by her stepson, and whose ghost——"

"I don't want that story, Brandy: don't tell it," entreats Flora, in an agony; whereupon Brandy is instantly suppressed by Blunden.

"I'll tell you one," says Kenneth, who is very fond of Flora. "There was once a very charming little girl, the most charming and beautiful and fascinating little girl in all the world, and her name was Flora, and she——"

"That's me," interrupts Flora, ungratefully. "I won't have it! I hate having stories told *at* me."

"Well, I'll tell you one," volunteers Blunden. "There was once a most inveterate little tomboy, a perfect heart-break to her entire family and her immediate friends, and her name was Flossy."

"Jack," says Flora, indignantly, "I'm not a tomboy, and I sha'n't forgive you for saying it. You know you mean me also."

"It is impossible," returns Jack: "how could a charming little lady and a disreputable tomboy be one and the same person?"

"Hear my story," says Kitty. "There was once a teapot, and in it was tea——"

"You're joking," interrupts Brandy, with a bland smile. "Now, are you sure it was tea?"

"Quite sure. And moreover," says Kitty, rising, "I am sure it will be cold tea if we don't get it soon. Ring the bell, Brandy, for Parkins to light the lamps."

"I'll light them," says Brandy, who would rather do anything sometimes than sit still.

So the lamps are lit, and simultaneously they all rise and move towards the table whereon lies the tea. Almost at this moment the door opens, and Cook herself, dressed in her best gown and with her grandest cap upon her head, appears in the doorway, bearing the biggest and handsomest cake, all frosted and ornamented, you ever saw in all your life.

"Miss Flora's birthday-cake, and wishing her many happy returns of the day," she says, executing an elaborate curtsy upon the threshold.

"Oh, thank you, *dear* Cookie," says Miss Flora, rapturously.

"I don't think I ever saw so pretty a cake," says Gretchen, with gentle enthusiasm, turning her soft smile upon the gratified queen of the "lower regions," who, having deposited her enormous burden on the table, is gradually departing.

"Is there a ring in it, Cook?" asks Brandy.

"Yes, Master Brandy," says Cook, who has lived with them since Brandy was three years old.

"Well, if I get it, Cook, you shall come and dance at my wedding," says Master Brandy, genially; whereupon Cook performs another curtsy and, with a smirk, departs.

As Gretchen is passing Kenneth's sofa, he by a slight gesture detains her.

"Whom did you burn yourself with to-night?" he asks, with an uncertain smile.

"Why, that would be telling," returns she; "and you know if I declare my secret I shall not get what I wish for."

"What did you wish for?—Scarlett?"

"No," says Gretchen, blushing as red as the name he has just mentioned. "How absurd!"

"And yet you blush."

"That you could accuse me of such a thing, and because of the question generally."

"You are sure?"

"Quite sure. Though perhaps"—with a little shrug—"if it were not the truth I should say just the same. Shall I bring you some tea?"

"Thank you,"—letting her hand go slowly.

She brings him a cup of tea with her own hands, and one for herself, and, sinking again into the seat beside him, tells him sweetly she is going to keep him company. The old phrase falls with quaint tenderness from her lips, and her eyes as they rest on his gleam kindly.

Kitty, at the other end of the room, seeing her, frowns. A little shadow grows within her dark eyes. A sense of uneasiness for the first time touches her. She marks Gretchen's beautiful face, on which at this instant rests an expression of the keenest content, and Kenneth's handsome one, fuller of pleasure than it is wont to be, and a sharp pang rends her bosom. If it should be! But no, it is impossible. It would be too terrible. Surely of all people on earth her gentle "bonny Meg" must be meant for happiness. Her own folly has bred the thought. It is only that Gretchen dreads his feeling neglected, poor fellow. She is ever thinking of others and their comfort, and how best to please them, dear angel! And yet—if it should be——

"I have the ring!" cries Brandy, suddenly.

"No! have you?" exclaims Flora, in accents overwhelmed with despair.

"Really I am afraid it was a mistake, after all," says Brandy, in a changed tone, quite satisfied now he has taken what he would call "a rise" out of Flora. "I quite thought

I *had*, you know, but I fear it was only a raisin. See how far imagination can lead one."

"You are only pretending," says Flora. "But Kitty looks serious. Have you got it, Kitty? Oh, don't say you have it, Kitty."

She moves towards her sister as she speaks; and, Kitty stepping backwards, with a laugh, the piece of cake in which the precious emblem of eternity is supposed to be lying falls to the ground. Gretchen, who has come up to the table, stoops and picks it up.

"Yes, it is here, it is indeed here," she cries, gayly, drawing out the little plain gold hoop from its sweet bed and slipping it on her finger. "Now, which of us may claim it, Kitty? The cake certainly was yours, but I found the ring."

"Kitty will be married first, and you second," interprets Scarlett, willingly. "So I read the riddle."

"O wise young judge! how I do honor thee!" laughs Gretchen. "But poor Flora! Never mind, Flo: I dare say the cake is better than the ring."

* * * * *

Some hours later, Kitty, having dismissed her maid, walks leisurely into Gretchen's room and up to the fireplace, where she stands gazing meditatively into the glowing coals.

"Good child," says Gretchen; "sit down in my chair, Kitty, and talk to me whilst I undress."

"How strange Tom Scarlett should have come in to-night!" says Kitty, rather absently. The apparent want of meaning in this speech is very well done indeed, and might have deceived older people than Gretchen.

"Very strange, wasn't it? But I was glad of it. It is always so easy to amuse Tom; and his presence gave quite the air of a party to Flo's entertainment."

"He is good-looking, too."

"Very handsome, *I* think; don't you?"

"Ye—es. Kenneth is better to look at: isn't he?"

"Is he?"

"Don't you think so, dear?"

"Well, yes, perhaps his features are more regular."

"Much more regular. What a pity he should be as he is!—such a hopeless invalid. He will never be any better; every one says that."

"It is very sad,"—slowly.

"He is so charming,—so desirable in every way,—so much to be liked."

"Very much."

"He is one of the most agreeable men I ever met in my life," says Kitty, growing warmer in her praise as Gretchen proves cold and immovable.

"Sometimes," replies Gretchen, who cannot conquer the desire to appear indifferent.

"True," says Kitty, suddenly and treacherously shifting her ground. "I have noticed how on occasions he can be morose enough, almost sullen. To-night he would not speak after Tom's arrival. I am sure he dislikes him; and that is very unreasonable."

"My dear Kitty," says Gretchen, quickly, "what a curious idea for you to form! Why should he dislike Captain Scarlett? I am sure he does not. He is not in the least unreasonable; and as to being morose or sullen, how can you so misjudge him, poor fellow!"

Kitty laughs faintly.

"What a partisan you are!" she says. "And yet a moment since you sang his praises coldly. It reminded me of the 'faint praise that damns.' You really like him, Meg?"

"Yes,—very much," replies Gretchen, freezing again, and speaking in her coldest tones.

Kitty rises.

"I must go," she says, kissing Gretchen tenderly on either cheek. "Good-night, Meg." Then as she reaches the door she turns and says, slowly, "Don't let yourself like him *too* much, my dearest."

CHAPTER IX.

"Rest is in heaven, and we are on the earth,
Where nothing lives but crosses, cares, and grief."

"I HAVE come," says Gretchen, shyly.

It is the night of the Potters' ball, and very nearly ten o'clock. Gretchen, coming into the full glare of the library lamps, looks like some white vision fresh from fairy-land, in her robe of snowy tulle undefiled by color of any description, unless one counts the tremulous green leaves of the water-lilies that lie—as though just freshly thrown—upon her gown. Her hair (wise child that she proves herself) is quite unchanged, the same soft little wavy locks straying across her forehead that usually rest there. Her eyes, dark violet, and true and tender as that sweetest of flowers, glance down at Dugdale from under the long lashes that sweep the white cheek beneath. As a rule, no roses warm her face; to-night she is peculiarly pale,—pallid as her gown, fair as a fragile snowdrop.

"I dressed myself very quickly," she says, rather nervously, feeling as though she has laid herself open to the charge of vanity. "I have just three minutes to—to bid you good-night."

She pauses, and Dugdale says nothing. Perhaps something in the situation strikes her as comical, because presently she raises her eyes, and meeting his—and being cheered by the unmistakable admiration in them—she gives way to laughter.

"Won't you speak?" she says. "The truth is, I haven't come down so much to bid you good-night as to show you my new dress, and to hear you say you think I look very nice in it. And—and you haven't said it!"

"There are times when mere words seem poor. Come nearer, Gretchen. I can hardly see you there."

She comes slowly up to him, and, standing so, furls and unfurls her fan with a certain bashfulness that sits very prettily upon her.

"It is a very charming dress, is it not? It is mamma's present to me. Don't you think it suits me?" inquires she, anxiously.

"You are lovelier even than I thought you," returns he, simply.

"You have taken a weight off my mind. Your silence seemed to me so ominous that I dreaded a disparaging remark. I am very glad you admire me," says Gretchen, in a relieved tone, taking an exhaustive survey of her own perfect image in an opposite mirror, "because—to confess a secret—I have been admiring myself immensely for the last half-hour. Why, how uncomfortable you look! I never saw such troublesome pillows as yours. I really think they must fall down purposely at my approach, to make me shake them up again, as I never see them in their proper place."

This remark is so near the truth that Kenneth has the grace to blush.

"They *are* uncomfortable," he says, meekly, and makes a most palpably hopeless effort to rearrange them.

"Let me do it," says Gretchen, and, stooping over him, she gently lifts his head on to one bare smooth arm, while with the other hand she turns and pats and softens the pillows, finally restoring his head to its proper resting-place.

"Thank you, my gentle nurse," whispers he, in a low tone.

At this identical moment, Parkins, entering with the admirably noiseless step that so becomes him, and on which he prides himself so highly, presents to Gretchen a very exquisite bouquet of choicest white flowers, arranged in a silver holder, and accompanied by a note.

"With Captain Scarlett's compliments," says Parkins, deferentially yet confidentially; after which he retires to the doorway and there awaits further orders.

"What lovely flowers, and how sweet!" exclaims Gretchen. "Are they not?"—holding them under Dugdale's nose.

"Very," replies he, who would rather have inhaled the breath of the "deadly nightshade" than Scarlett's gift.

"So thoughtful of Tom," goes on Gretchen, in a pleased tone. "I wonder what he says?" Opening the letter, she reads aloud little scraps of it as her eyes scan the page.

"So sorry he cannot be at the Potters' to-night, as he has sprained his foot. Oh, poor, poor fellow! His love to me,

and many happy returns of the day; and—and—yes”—an eloquent hesitation—"he hopes I will like the flowers; and—and that's all."

"There seems a good deal of it," remarks Dugdale.

"Who brought these flowers, Parkins?"

"Captain Scarlett's man, miss."

"My kind regards to Captain Scarlett, Parkins, and I am sorry he is laid up, and so pleased with his charming flowers."

"Yes, miss."

"Little Tom Scarlett' seems most attentive," says Dugdale, with a short smile. With all his determination to appear unconcerned, his voice betrays him. He has been fighting with melancholy all the evening, and now it has gained the victory. Scarlett's flowers have proved the "last straw."

"What is it, Kenneth?" asks Gretchen, quickly, putting the white blossoms on a distant table. "You are wishing for something, are you not?"

"Yes; that I might rise from this hateful couch, and put on my evening clothes, and go with you to this ball, and dance with you all the night. That is all,"—with a bitter laugh. "A small wish, is it not?"

"I too have a wish," says Gretchen, infinite compassion in her clear eyes and a brightness that may be tears. "I wish that, instead of going to this ball to-night, I could stay at home with you and help to kill those dreary thoughts that at times distress you."

"Don't say that, if you don't mean it," says Dugdale, rather unsteadily. As he speaks he puts out his hand almost unconsciously and takes hers in a close warm clasp.

"I do mean it," replies she, quietly,—so quietly that his agitation ceases, and his grasp on her hand grows lighter, though not less full of warmth.

"I sent for this for your birthday," he says, presently, drawing from beneath his head a case of purple morocco. Opening it, he discloses to view a bracelet,—a band of dead gold richly inlaid, and with the word "Gretchen" formed in diamonds upon one side. All round the name a small band of "marguerites" lies like a delicate framing.

"For me!" says Gretchen, blushing hotly. "Oh, how lovely! How exquisite! And my own name, too! How did you manage that?"

"I ordered it for you some time ago. I am so glad you like it."

"It was too kind,—far too kind. How shall I thank you?" murmurs she, the blush deepening by fine degrees upon her pretty cheeks.

"Very easily," replies he, smiling at her evident, almost childish delight. "Do you recollect how once, when you went to the *Scarletts'* picnic, you told me you had thought of me amidst all your amusement? Think of me again, if only once, to-night, and I shall have more to be thankful for to-morrow than you have to-night."

"That is too simple a request," says Gretchen, softly, her eyes lowered. "Had I never seen this beautiful bracelet I should have thought of you all the same,—not once, but many times, to-night."

Silence follows this speech. On Gretchen a sense of melancholy has fallen too, curving the corners of her lips. Crossing the room, her soft white skirts trailing behind her, she draws back the heavy velvet curtains of the window and looks out upon the night.

Diana, in the heavens, is holding high festival, with all her court around her, and now flings into the library a rich flood of moonlight that dyes with virgin silver all it touches, and, falling upon Gretchen, steeps her in its glory. The extreme beauty of the night enters into the girl's soul and chains her to the spot; it seems to mingle and harmonize with the vague sorrow that distresses her. The cold yet sparkling brilliancy of the world without enchants her.

Titania, with all her tiny train, might be abroad; so calm, so placid, so covered with trembling moonbeams are "field and flood and fell;" while in the distance "that full star that ushers in the even" gleams mildly down upon the sleeping earth.

One soft great ray, gliding in, catches and holds Gretchen in its chill embrace; and Dugdale, gazing at her, envies the amorous beam. She is standing beside the crimson velvet of the curtains with a fold of it crushed in her left hand, and with her head thrown slightly backwards, so that her fair brown hair seems to mingle and blend with the richer coloring behind it.

Always pale, the waxen light from without seems to inten-

sify her pallor and adds to the dark violet eyes a deeper shade.

"O rare pale Margaret!" says Dugdale, beneath his breath; but she hears him, and turns to him with a smile and a half-suppressed sigh born of her late thoughts.

"You remind me," says Dugdale, "of some picture, some story,—a legend of the Rhine, I think it is,—as you stand there clad in moonbeams. Come nearer to me, or I shall fear to see you melt away altogether, as did the 'hapless ladye' of that tale."

"There are times," says Gretchen, not noticing his last remark, but coming quickly forward into the fuller, warmer light of the lamps,—“there are times when I can almost read your heart. To-night it seems bare to me. At least I know you are vainly longing for something. What is it, Kenneth?"

"Death," replies he, quietly. "Why do I live? Surely extinction is preferable to the existence I drag on from day to day."

"Don't speak like that, Ken: it saddens me," murmurs she, tremulously. And then, with some timidity, "Extinction is not for us. There is always a heaven."

"For such as you, perhaps. Heaven was made for angels: for myself"—recklessly—"I see no hope at any point."

His tone compels her, although reluctantly, to turn her eyes to his; and, seeing something in his face strange yet in part familiar,—as it were, the waking confirmation of a dream,—she says, hurriedly,—

"Can I do nothing for you, Kenneth?"

"Nothing. Not you, of all people. There is no help for me anywhere. I wish with all my heart I were quietly dead."

"Oh, Kenneth, not that! Do not wish that!" entreats she, hastily, a touch of terror in her tone. Great tears gather and dim the lustre of her eyes. She draws her breath sharply, and lays one hand with a pathetic gesture on her bosom, as though to still the sob that seeks to rise.

"What can I say to comfort you?" she asks, sorrowfully.

"Forgive me," returns he, stricken with remorse as he notes the effect of his want of self-control. "I am a brute to distress you so, and on this night of all others, when

you should know none but happy thoughts. Why, I have hardly wished you happiness and joy, have I? But I do, Gretchen, from my heart. You believe that, do you not?"

"I do, indeed; but I am glad you have said it," replies she, honestly.

"Now go, child: do not keep your mother waiting. I am not fit company for you."

"I cannot leave you in this mood," says Gretchen, earnestly. "I know you well enough to understand how you will spend the rest of the evening brooding over——"

"I will not," interrupts he, eagerly. "I promise you so much, if it will please you. I shall think only of the good that yet remains to me. I shall think of you,—your friendship. Now leave me, while I am in my better mood."

Raising her hand, he kisses it impulsively; but, having done it, his brow contracts, and he colors faintly. Seeing, however, no anger and little surprise on Gretchen's face, he recovers himself.

"Go, Gretchen; go, *darling*," he whispers, in a low tone.

CHAPTER X.

"And your gown's a most rare fashion, i' faith."

Much Ado About Nothing.

"I do betray myself with blushing."

Love's Labor's Lost.

THE tears so long delayed fall slowly one by one down Gretchen's cheeks as she mechanically mounts the stairs again to her mother's room. At the door she pauses, and, brushing them away, resolutely throws up her head, as though determined to suppress all further signs of emotion. She has barely, however, restored herself to composure when Flora, who has seen her before and assisted at her toilet, coming along the corridor, calls to her to stop, that she may admire her afresh.

When she has said a word or two of mildest criticism, she peers curiously in her sister's face, and marks with fatal shrewdness the pinkness of her lids.

"Why, my darling pet," says Miss Flora, promptly, in the protecting tone she always employs towards Gretchen, "you have been crying! Now, who has dared to vex you on your birthday?"

"No one; I am not vexed," returns Gretchen, hurriedly.

"It is just like you to seek to shield the guilty; but you can't deceive me, and I shall make it the business of my life to discover the offender. By the by," says this terrible child, quickly, "did I not see you enter the library some time ago?"

"Even if you did, I am not vexed," replies Gretchen, quietly, and, turning the handle of the door, escapes into her mother's room from further cross-examination.

Mrs. Tremaine is still struggling languidly with the few more last finishing-touches she considers necessary to the perfecting of her appearance.

"We shall be a little late, mamma, shall we not?" asks Gretchen, sitting where the light does not immediately fall on her.

"Oh, no, dear. We shall be there quite long enough—too long—even as it is. A little of the society of such people as the Potters goes a great way. But for your father—who really has a perfect talent for taking up the most extraordinary people—I should not dream of showing there at all. Where are my gloves? Positively, Tymon grows duller and more dull daily."

"Are these they?"

"Yes, dear. So clever of you to find them, and so like Tymon to put them where no one could possibly see them." (They are lying on the table exactly under her nose.) "Did I hear you go down-stairs a few minutes since, Gretchen?"

"Yes, dear."

"How quickly you dressed! You know I always said Cole was a treasure; so unlike Tymon: Tymon positively can't hurry, and is never quite sure whether her head is on her shoulders or lying about somewhere. My dear child, that dress suits you deliciously. I have seldom seen you look so charming. And it isn't affectionate prejudice on my part; no, really; it is the whole arrangement that is in such admirable form. My own choosing, too. So glad it is a success, dear. I was always famous for my unerring taste. Has your father seen you? and Kenneth?"

"Not papa yet; but I went to the library to—to show Kenneth your pretty present."

"And he was pleased with it?"

"I think so; yes, I am sure of it. At least he said so." She hesitates over this speech, and blushes rather provokingly.

"Well, of course he would, you know," says Mrs. Tremaine.

"He"—nervously—"he gave me this bracelet, mamma; is it not lovely?"

"When?"

"Just now. When I went to see him in the library he gave it to me as a birthday present. Is it not charming? See,"—slipping it off her arm,—"*my name is written on it.*"

"It is beautiful," says Mrs. Tremaine, in a curious tone. She is looking, not at the bracelet, but at her daughter's eyes. "You have been crying," she says, quietly, without removing her gaze.

"Yes,—a little,"—blushing crimson now. "I could not help it. He looked so sad, so lonely, so regretful. It does seem hard that he can never again go to a ball or enjoy life as other men can."

"It is." Mrs. Tremaine has grown absent, and is now examining the bracelet.

"What did he say to you when giving it?"

"Nothing,—except that he was glad it pleased me, and that."

"The name is perfectly done, and the diamonds very fine. He must have ordered it for you."

"Of course: he said so."

"It is a very handsome present, and a very expensive one. Are you quite sure, Gretchen,"—again raising her eyes to her daughter's,—"*quite sure you wish to accept it?*" There is a world of meaning in her tone.

"Wish!" says Gretchen, puzzled. "But of course I could not refuse. He seemed so glad to give it; and he has so few pleasures. I felt it would pain him to return it, and—he has so *much* pain."

"Take care you do not increase it," says Mrs. Tremaine, still in the same curious tone, "Mental pain, child, is worse than bodily."

"What do you mean, mamma?" asks Gretchen, shrinking

a little. The flush fades from her cheek, leaving a deadly pallor to replace it. Her eyes grow larger. Instinctively she lays one hand upon the arm of the chair near her.

"Perhaps nothing, But thoughtlessness causes more trouble and pain than people know of. Are you ready, dear? Is Kitty coming?"

"I shall see," says Gretchen, in a stifled tone, hurrying gladly from the room.

Mrs. Tremaine, left behind, taps the two first fingers of her right hand musingly upon the table. Her brow is somewhat clouded.

"Fifteen thousand a year," she says, slowly. "Fifteen,—and half of it not entailed! He might leave it to whom he chose. How afflicted he is! And how ill he is looking! He cannot live long, I fear, poor fellow. Fifteen thousand a year!"

She sighs profoundly, smooths away the lines from her forehead with careful fingers, and, gathering up her fan and scent-bottle, sweeps from the room to her carriage.

Dugdale, hearing the door close upon them, and the servants returning again along the hall, moves his head to take up his neglected book, determined to be faithful to his promise to Gretchen not to let morbid thoughts get possession of him, As he does so, his eyes fall upon an object lying on one of the distant tables,—an object full of interest to him. It is Scarlett's bouquet that lies there, withering and forgotten!

* * * * *

The satisfaction that accrues from this small circumstance gladdens his heart all night, making the hours seem fewer and less gloomy. It even carries him successfully through part of the next morning, and might have sustained him all day but for—Flora's visit.

Flora, having bided her time, comes to him before the others have made their lazy way down-stairs, and by the severity of her appearance—even before she speaks—reduces him to a state of prostration and makes him shiver in his shoes. She is quite collected,—horribly collected,—and there is an amount of determination in her eyes not to be overlooked. She is evidently in one of her most awful moods. Coming majestically into the library, she closes the door gently but tightly behind her.

"Come to read to me, Flora?" asks poor Kenneth, with a view to staving off the evil hour and subduing the wrath of the goddess.

"No, I have come to speak to you. I have come to have it out with you," replies Miss Flora, in a tone few could rival.

"My dear Flora, what have I done?" demands Kenneth, beginning already (even before knowing his offence) to be deeply contrite.

"About last night,"—severely. "I should like to know what you said to my Gretchen to reduce her to tears. It must have been something abominably rude,—downright ungentlemanly; because when she came out of this room she was crying. She must have been in *floods of tears*," says Flora, graphically describing by a movement of the arm a perfect ocean. "So I made up my mind to see you in the morning and learn the truth."

"Gretchen crying?"—unsteadily.

"Don't prevaricate: it's mean," says his companion, sternly. "I am glad to see you are ashamed of yourself, and that you have the grace to blush. I would have you know Gretchen is an angel. No one ever says an unkind thing to Gretchen. And any one who could"—viciously—"deserves—Well, never mind; I sha'n't say too much, as it is a first offence. But don't do it again, or you and I shall cease to be friends."

"I assure you I am innocent; I don't even know what you are talking about," says Kenneth, who has grown very pale, and whose eyes are shaded by his hand. "I would rather die than say anything unkind to—to your sister."

"You had better not," retorts Flora, severely. "I for one should not forgive you in a hurry. And—she didn't cry for nothing, you know. It was such a shame, too, to spoil her pretty looks just when she was going to a party. Gretchen has eyes that should never know tears. They are like dove's eyes: are they not?"

"Are they? I think you flatter the doves," replies he, dreamily.

"A very charming compliment," acknowledges Miss Flora, somewhat appeased. "It reminds me of those dreadful old muffs Lord Chesterfield and Sir Charles Grandison, and all the rest of them. Don't you think they must have found it very slow making those solemn bows all over the place and

firing off their little set speeches at every soul they met? It must have been very trying to the constitution. I have no doubt they stayed awake half the night inventing what they called their *bon-mots*, and that is why they look so withered in their pictures."

"Perhaps so," Mr. Dugdale acquiesces, absently. "Is Gretchen down-stairs yet?"

"I dare say she is by this time. Do you want her to come and read to you?"

"I should like to see her."

"Well, I shouldn't wonder if she refused to come, you know, after all that has happened,—unless you have made it up with her."

"Ask her, will you? And, Flora, you won't repeat to her all you have said to me?"

"What do you take me for?"—indignantly. "Do you think I should let her know I thought it *possible* any one could be uncivil to her? No, indeed. Poor darling!—I'll give her your message, Kenneth, and I hope she will come, that's all!" Saying which, the spirited damsel disappears through the doorway.

CHAPTER XI.

"They never met but there is a skirmish
Of wits between them."—*Much Ado About Nothing*.

"This love that thou hast shown
Doth add more grief to too much of mine own."

THE year is drawing to its close,—is rushing with mad haste into the arms of death. There is no shrinking, such as you and I might feel; no eager longing for delay, no touch of faintness as the end draws near; with storm, and rain, and raging tempest the strong year hurries onward, age, and the weight of all the bitter griefs and cruel crimes it carries, being powerless to stay its flight.

It is bleak December. And this day week will be Christmas-day. Kitty has been married now for more than a

month, and has written two or three happy letters to the Towers from her resting-place in Rome.

The wedding was quiet and very successful. It was only at the last that Gretchen and Kitty forgot themselves, and so far lost sight of "the way we live now" as utterly to break down and cling to each other with bitter weeping until gentle force divided them. What in all the world is sadder than the word "Farewell"?

Weddings as a rule are dismal affairs, and Kitty's towards its close was specially so. Even Dandy (who was best man) and Brandy (who plainly considered himself a better) gave way to some emotion. This was so unexpected that it took all hearts by storm, and procured for Brandy the following week a very liberal check from a crusty uncle, who happened to be one of the wedding guests.

As the hour for departure drew nigh, Dandy embraced the bride warmly, much to her surprise and Sir John's undisguised amusement, after which both he and Brandy distributed showers of rice so liberally that for days afterwards people, looking at the gravel, deceived themselves into the belief that there had been a mild snow-storm during the night. They were both energetic and dejected at the same moment. And indeed towards evening, when Kitty was far on her way towards the North, they were discovered arm-in-arm in the shrubberies, with positive tears in their eyes. Some said these pearly drops were caused by genuine emotion; others made mention of a homely herb; there were a base few who meanly attributed them to champagne. No notice was taken of these last.

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The day is murky, and full of unshed rain; that is, the clouds lower, and the winds moan, and a gray veil covers the land, and one expects the coming deluge every moment. Yet it tarries spitefully, as though it knew that, though grief saddens, suspense kills.

Such days are trying to the temper. Even Brandy, who has obtained leave for Christmas, and has been at home now two days, and who has absolutely no temper to speak of, grows slightly intolerable. Having tired of flattening his nose against the window-pane and making impossible bets

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about the rain-drops as they hurry madly down the glass, he desists from such light amusement and turns his kind attention upon Flora. It is so kind that presently it reduces her to tears and extreme anger.

"Brandrum and Flora, why is it that you two cannot be alone for five minutes without causing unpleasantness?" says Mrs. Tremaine, entering the room where both are.

"My dear mother, it is nothing," says Brandy, elaborately. "I happened, unfortunately, to tell Flora I thought I saw a suspicion of verdancy in her eyes, and she rather took it to heart; though I'm sure I don't know why. I rather prefer green eyes myself. But that is all, I give you my honor."

"You are always teasing me," declares Flora, still dissolved in tears, "and my eyes are *not* green: they are quite blue. Kenneth said yesterday they were very like Gretchen's, and she has lovely eyes. As for your own,"—spitefully,—“they are the image of a cat's.”

"As I say," remarks Brandy, affably. "It evidently runs in the family, like that very much overdone wooden leg. It is plainly hereditary. Indeed, to prove this to you, my dear Flora, I could repeat an expression formerly much in vogue among our progenitors, but which of late years has been adopted by the *canaille* and has become somewhat hackneyed and decidedly vulgar. You may have heard it; it is just possible. Shall I repeat it to you?"

"No, thank you,"—angrily; "I don't care for your repetitions."

"But, my dear child, that is wrong of you. One should hold the traditions of one's forefathers as sacred, and not treat them lightly or with ignominy. I am surprised at your want of proper feeling; but, as I think it arises from ignorance and the mere callousness of extreme youth, I pardon it, and shall give you the expression I speak of."

"I sha'n't listen to it."

"Nowadays," goes on Brandy, unmoved, "when one man meets another he makes use of the silly formula,—which means so little,—‘How d'ye do?’ but in bygone ages when one of our ancestors came in contact with his fellow he said, ‘D'ye see any green in my eye?’ and was invariably answered in the affirmative. This is an indisputable proof that the green tinge was considered a charm even in the earlier and

darker ages. You have it very slightly as yet: let us hope age will help to develop it."

"I don't believe you know anything about the 'darker ages,'" says Flora, contemptuously.

"I have read more than you give me credit for," replies he, with dignity. "That was the age in which the sun was always behind a cloud; and people walked about in sheets, with candles in their hands, looking for honest men. The fashion, I believe, was led by a certain Jane Shore of happy memory. At that time, too, candles were in such request (as was only natural) that Alfred the Great made clocks of them, and could tell you the hour to an *inch*."

"I wonder how you can talk such arrant nonsense!" says Flora, with a disdainful curl of her pretty lip. "Have you forgotten papa is waiting for you? He says he wants to speak to you,—no doubt about another unpaid tailor's bill."

"That is 'the unkindest cut of all,'"—rising negligently. "It makes me shiver in my boots. Now that you mention it, I think I did see a baleful light in our father's face when the post came in."

"I shouldn't wonder. Poor man!"

"And yet"—cheerfully—"I think you are mistaken. Hope tells me a flattering tale: perhaps the governor is sending for me to present to me a little gift,—a delicate offering in the shape of a check for fifty pounds. If I get it, Flora, you shall have at least half of it. Now, will you not thank me for such a noble promise?"

"I will,—when I get it," replies she, with scornful emphasis.

"That will be in a moment or two. The instant my fingers close upon the desired bit of paper I shall fly to you on the wings of love. You will stay here till my return with it?"

"Not likely! I shouldn't fancy remaining here forever," returns she, witheringly.

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Meantime, Gretchen, having read Kitty's last happy letter of the morning to her mother and every member of the family, runs down to Kenneth—who is still a visitor at the Towers—to give him sundry extracts from it. To leave the Towers before Christmas, Mrs. Tremaine had said to Dugdale, would

be simple madness, as of course he would have to come back again for that festive occasion, and going backwards and forwards was "such a worry." So Kenneth had stayed on, saying, with a laugh, the time would surely come when they would want to turn him out, and he should refuse to go. "Possession was nine points of the law," etc.

"I have had another letter from Kitty," says Gretchen, entering the library, with large eyes full of gladness and a bright smile.

"One always knows that by your face," returns he. "I can tell the day the foreign post arrives before you speak of it. Kitty is very fortunate: her life seems rich in love. Well, and does her letter please you? Does she still feast with the gods? So long married, and as yet no flaw, no 'little pitted speck'? It sounds like a fairy-tale."

It is one of poor Kenneth's bad days, when all the world seems less than nothing to him and faith in any good appears impossible. He has turned his eyes from her grieved ones, and with an impatient gesture pushes back the hair from his forehead, which throbs intolerably.

"Kitty is quite happy,—quite, if that is what you mean," says Gretchen, gravely. "Why should you question it? Why should you sneer at happiness? Surely there is such a thing, and you believe in it?"

"You accredit me with me too much fine feeling," replies he, with a short laugh. "Don't throw me over altogether if I confess that I do not. Why should I?"

"You cannot mean what you say. Kitty's case alone contradicts you. She, I know, will be always happy,—always."

"I'm sure I hope she may," says Kenneth, in an abominable tone. He shrugs his shoulders and gnaws viciously at the end of his fair moustache.

"I wish you would not speak in that tone: I quite hate it. It almost sounds as if you wished evil to my dear Kitty," says Gretchen, with some severity. "It is all in very bad taste. When people love, they must be happy; and you know as well as I do that Jack and Kitty perfectly adore each other."

"I know I am a very ill-tempered fellow, and, what is worse, an ungrateful one, to speak to you as I do," says Ken-

neath, in a voice difficult to translate. "Why do you waste your time here, Gretchen? I am not worth it. Go to the others, and get what good you can out of your life."

"Your head must be aching very badly to-day," says Gretchen, gently, ignoring this speech altogether.

"It irritates me that you should stay here boring yourself to death with a most uninteresting invalid," goes on Kenneth, with fretful pertinacity. "I know I am a miserable wretch, only half alive, and good for nothing,—and surly into the bargain; and that it is the extreme pity you feel for me that alone makes you bear with me as you do."

"I'm afraid your head is very, *very* bad to-day, my dear Kenneth," says Gretchen, with deep sympathy.

"It has often been worse,"—half angrily.

"Not very often, I think. At least talking must be wrong for it. So do not say any more, but let me read to you. And, Kenneth,"—laying a soft kind little hand on his,—“you must not think it is ‘pity’ brings me to see you: it is—that I like to come.”

Kenneth makes no reply. He does *not* even press the kind little hand. He turns his head resolutely away and stares out of the window at the tall bare trees that in the far distance fling their naked arms wildly to and fro.

"You are fond of Herrick," says Gretchen, after one swift comprehensive glance at his averted face, and, opening a volume, she begins to read in her tender musical voice.

"What is that poem 'To Anthea'?" asks he, presently, without looking round; and she reads to him the lovely words he speaks of that are so fond, and so eager, and so full of perfect (if slightly quixotic) sentiment:

"Thou art my life, my love, my heart,
The very eyes of me,
And hast command of every part,
To live and die for thee,"

reads Gretchen, with increased pathos, because it is a poem that specially delights her.

"To live and die for thee," repeats Dugdale, in a low voice, when she has finished. Something in his tone compels her to look up. He is very pale, and his eyes, dwelling upon hers with sad intensity, are filled with tears.

"What is it, Ken?" asks Gretchen, kneeling upon the footstool beside his couch and regarding him anxiously.

"Nothing."

"But surely there is something; some thought troubles you?"

"No."

"You cannot deceive me,"—seriously. "I am your friend, yet you will not trust me."

"There is nothing I can say to you,—nothing I dare say,—my dear, my darling! Can I speak of love to you,—I?" returns he, with sudden and mournful agitation.

Gretchen's hand trembles slightly. She does not blush, but a little pallor grows upon her, and a faint smile comes and curves the corners of her lips. For a long time she has believed herself dear to him, and now to hear the thought made a certainty is inexpressibly sweet to her.

"I am very glad you love me," she says, simply, without hesitation, letting shy but luminous eyes meet his for an instant.

"Gretchen!"

"Yes. Very glad. Why do you look at me so strangely? Is it not true, then, that you do love me?"

"I never said so."

"No,"—laughing,—"*your lips didn't, but your eyes did.* And—you would not have called me your '*darling*' had I not been dear to you."

"How could I have so spoken?" exclaims he, with bitter self-reproach. "To betray myself after the careful suppression of months! Gretchen, forget—forgive what I have said."

"But why should I forget, Ken? and what is there to forgive? Is it not beyond all question the truth? And why should I not rejoice at it, when—when I too love *you*?"

"What folly—what madness has possessed you?" exclaims he. "Gretchen, I forbid you to speak to me like this. Let me never hear you say such words again. It is a mockery,—an insult to such as I am."

"You mistake me——" begins Gretchen, growing very pale.

"Hush; I will listen to no more. You have said too much already. If"—with vehemence that hardly conceals his

pain—"I ever led you to believe I loved you, I lied. I do *not* love you. Go, leave me. What have I to do with love?"

Frightened, stunned by the passion he shows, Gretchen rises and goes slowly towards the door. She is bitterly wounded by his words, while understanding perfectly his motive for using them. She has her hand upon the handle when his voice arrests her. It is full of deep contrition.

"Gretchen," he says, entreatingly.

"Well?" coldly, without turning round.

"I have offended. I have behaved with unpardonable roughness; yet do not go until I have asked your pardon."

Slowly and with seeming reluctance she closes the door, and, again returning to his side, stands gazing down at him reproachfully, with clasped hands.

"I wonder how you can wish me to stay, when you do not love me," she says, tremulously.

"Perhaps"—with a sigh and a quick frown—"I wish you to go because I do love you."

"But how unreasonable that is! I think were I in your place I should be thankful if I found some one to care for me; that is, if I cared for the 'some one.'"

"I do care for you: it is useless my denying it now." Taking her hand, he holds it closely. "I love you madly, foolishly, because hopelessly. Day by day and every hour of the day, lying here upon my couch, I think of you only, and torture myself conjuring up scenes that can never be realized. This time last year I should have thought myself more than blessed in the knowledge that your heart was given to me a free gift. Now—— How happy, how contented we might have been together, you and I! What a perfect life ours might have proved! But it is too late."

He pauses, but Gretchen makes no reply. Her hand lies passively in his. Her long dark lashes effectually conceal the expression in her eyes.

"Sometimes I picture to myself we two on board my good old schooner cruising in the sunny Mediterranean, finding each happy day happier than the last. Then we are in Italy, and I can see your beloved face grow grave and solemn over the past glories of mighty Rome; or dimpling with laughter in merry Paris; or calm with sweet thought in our English

home. And then suddenly I awake, my fond dreams vanish, and again I know myself to be—what I am. Oh, to be strong and well once more!" he cries, throwing his arms with a passionate movement above his head. "Gretchen, is there in all this world a sadder thought than 'It might have been'?"

"Such as you are, I love you," replies the girl, earnestly. "Can you not find some slight comfort in that thought?"

"No. 'That way madness lies.' It is too dangerously sweet a thought. I dare not let myself find happiness in it. Dearest, what I said so roughly some time since I meant. What has passed between us to-day must never be repeated,—never. You must promise me this, or I shall be compelled at once to leave this house, where I have been so content. You should not refuse me in this matter, Gretchen; you should give the promise I require willingly, because I cannot, of course, forbid you to speak in your own home, and—I cannot run away from you,"—with a smile more sorrowful than bitterest weeping.

Gretchen, touched by it, burst into tears.

"Have I grieved you, my own?" asked Kenneth, pressing her hand gently to his lips. "You see, Gretchen, there is sadness in every thought of me."

"Yes, but gladness too,—my chief gladness," says Gretchen, with a sob.

CHAPTER XII.

"My thoughts hold mortal strife."—W. DRUMMOND.

"For thy sweet love remembered, such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings."

SHAKESPEARE.

Two or three days later Kenneth says to her again,—

"It is no use, Gretchen: I must go. You have broken down a barrier between us I am powerless to raise again. When I see you the desire to let you know all you are to me overcomes me."

"Let it overcome you,"—demurely.

"You should be the last to give such advice as that. No, it cannot be, and every hour only renders me more miserable. I must go."

"If you are miserable, by all means go."

"You know what I mean,"—reproachfully. "To leave this house is to leave all hope. But I will not remain here any longer."

"Why don't you say something about duty?" says Gretchen, bitterly. "It is a cold word, that would come in well there."

"You are ungenerous," replies he, in a pained tone.

Gretchen disdains reply, but, going over to the window, plays a faint vague little tune upon the pane with her first two fingers. After a short interval he goes on again, though with increased want of heart and some hesitation: "Perhaps when I am at Laxton you will come to see me sometimes with your mother? That room where first I saw you never seemed quite empty afterwards. I could close my eyes and again see you stand in the window framed in by the roses and the straggling ivy,—could almost believe I heard your voice."

"What a vivid imagination! No doubt the ideal will console you for the loss of the real."

"I never knew you unkind before," says Dugdale, looking hurt. "But I know you do not mean it. You will come to see me now and then, will you not?"

"On Easter Sunday and May-day, Allhallow e'en, and Christmas morning?" answers Gretchen, with a poor attempt at sarcasm. "Or will that, perhaps, be too often? You can tell me later on. How well you have arranged matters! How pleased you are to go! Can you not imagine some plan, too, for *my* consolation?"

"Time will be your cure," returns he, gravely. "You will miss me for a day or two, it may be; I shall miss *you* to my dying hour."

"How well you read my heart!"

"In this instance at least I hope I do,"—with sudden vehemence. "To know you too were suffering would be more than I could bear."

"But I shall suffer; you wrong me cruelly," exclaims she,

with trembling voice, turning from the window to confront him with a pale little face and large angry mournful eyes. "How can I think of you all alone at Laxton without feeling sorrow that will haunt me? Who will speak to you, or read to you? Who will know (even when you are most silent) how your head aches,—or your heart? You can go if you like," says Miss Tremaine, conjuring up a fresh burst of wrath, "but you sha'n't think I sha'n't be wretched when you do go."

"The more you talk such mad folly, the more convinced I am that the Towers is no longer a fit place for me," says poor Dugdale, making a last brave effort to be firm.

"Very well, then, go. But I am sure, under the circumstances, it will not be a correct thing for me to go and see you even with mamma, so do not expect me. A visit from me would only distress you and make you 'miserable.' And indeed, as my very presence seems to annoy you, I shall not come to the library again while you remain in the house. My absence will doubtless prove to you how far happier you will be without me."

Having uttered this appalling threat with all due solemnity, she sweeps from the room, leaving her opponent thoroughly dismayed and routed with great slaughter.

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With all Gretchen's gentleness, there is about her a certain amount of firmness that enables her to keep the word uttered so hastily. One, two, three days pass, and she so well manages that, without betraying herself to any member of her family, she neither sees nor holds communication of any sort with Dugdale. On the fourth day, at two o'clock, he succumbs. Flora, going into the library at that hour, finds him strangely dejected, and, expressing instant sympathy, is told some story about a headache (oh, what should we do without our headaches?), and is intrusted with a little twisted note to be given to Gretchen immediately.

"I shall fly with it," says the little compassionate Mercury, and forthwith delivers it to Gretchen, who is sitting in solitary grandeur in the morning-room.

The past few days of enforced separation have been to her, as to Dugdale, interminable, and bald and barren to the last degree. This very moment, as Flora approaches her, she has

almost made up her mind to forego pride, to give in quietly, and, going meekly to the library, demand a renewal of the old friendship. But this she would have done reluctantly and with a sorry grace: so that the submission on his part is doubly dear to her.

The note is but a mere scribble, a word or two, asking, nay, entreating her to come to him if only for a moment.

"Thank you, dear," she says, calmly, to the observant Flora; and then, going up-stairs, she adds a few little touches to her toilet, and brushes her soft hair until it is still softer, and pinches her cheeks until there is a charming color in them, unusual as lovely, after which she runs down again and presents herself before Dugdale with as successful an air of indifference about her as though her heart is not in reality beating with unpleasant force.

Kenneth is looking pale and harassed. Miss Tremaine, on account of the vigorous pinching bestowed upon her unfortunate cheeks, is looking distractingly pretty and in excellent form.

"Gretchen, how could you treat me so?" asks Kenneth, purposely ignoring the hand she holds out to him.

"Treat you how?" demands she, with a charming assumption of innocence.

"For nearly four days you have not come near me,—four endless days."

"Does that distress you? The last time I saw you I think you gave me to understand my presence was, if anything, distasteful to you. I would not willingly annoy you. I thought it best for you to stay away. Of course I should not be here now but for your note, and the fact that, to-morrow being Christmas-day, I thought it would be unnatural to refuse so slight a request."

She tells this little fib blandly, but without looking at him.

"I can quite believe it,"—bitterly. "Indeed, I feel I ought to apologize for having sent for you; but I confess I wanted to see you again. May I congratulate you on your appearance? I have seldom seen you look so well or so happy." Then, in a lower tone, "I have been most unhappy."

"You can hardly expect sympathy from me. You need not be unhappy," replies she, slowly.

"Dearest, do not speak to me in that tone," entreats he,

miserably. "Oh, Gretchen, could you only know all I have endured during these past few days, you would be kinder. Such a very few! That is the horror of it. When I think that all my life must be passed thus, without you, it seems too much. Darling, darling, I cannot live without you."

"You shall not," returns she, quickly, all her manner changed. Her eyes brighten, her lips part, a smile follows upon the late coldness of her face as though it were a sunbeam upon the departing edges of a cloud. She falls upon her knees beside him.

"Let us end all this," she says, quietly. "You have not been more wretched than I have been during all these horrible days. I spoke untruly when I said I should not be here now but for your message. I should. I was coming when Flo brought it. Nothing would have kept me from you another hour. How cold, how heartless you must think me for having stayed away so long! But you will forgive me now?"

Putting his arm round her neck as she leans towards him, he draws her head down upon his shoulder until her cheek rests against his.

"You see, after all, I am the more sensible of the two," she goes on, in a little soft whisper. "We cannot do without each other: can we? You want me, and I want you. How can we fight against fate? It is too powerful for us. You remember"—caressingly—"all we said the other day? Dear Ken, give me my own way."

"If I did, later on you would curse me."

"Try me."

"Do you know what it is you want to do?"

"I know it well."

"You want to marry a confirmed cripple. Out of the heavenly pity of your heart you would devote all your fresh young life to the nursing of an incurable invalid. It is horrible. It is impossible."

"I sha'n't let you call yourself names," she says, softly. "You are not a cripple; and even if you were I should only love you just the same."

There is silence between them for some time, and then Kenneth says,—

"If you should ever repent, if you should ever regret this

most unnatural marriage,—and I should know it by your eyes: they could not deceive me,—it would kill me. Though, perhaps,”—with a sigh,—“that would not be so sad an ending after all. My death would be the best thing that could happen for you—and me.”

“How cruel you are!” whispers she, with a faint catching of the breath.

“What will your father say?” asks he, presently.

“I don’t know. But I am sure when I tell him everything he will let me do as I wish.”

“Shall I speak to him?”

“No; not until I have spoken to him,” says Gretchen, hastily. A fear lest her father in his first surprise should say something to wound the man she loves enables her to overcome the nervous dislike she feels to declare her affection for him.

“As you please,” says Dugdale, secretly much relieved. “Though I do not think he will give his consent. You may as well tell him, in case he should not know it, that only half the property is entailed, and that I can leave you the remainder.”

“Very well.” Then, after a pause, “Do you know”—earnestly—“I have a strange feeling—a positively certain feeling—that some day you will be strong and well again?”

“I hope”—shaking his head sceptically—“you are not marrying me on that chance.”

“No; I am marrying you because I love you; for no other reason. Perhaps”—mischievously—“had you been strong and well I should have regarded you with scorn; yet I still hold to my belief. By the by, you have never yet proposed to me. Do so now.”

“What shall I say?”

“What a question! Why, anything you like. Did you—did you never propose to a girl before?”

“Never.”

“I am glad of that,” exclaims she, with a quick and lovely smile. “Now go on; make even the silliest speech, and I shall find an excuse for it.”

“I hardly know how to begin,” says he, sadly. “Well, then, Gretchen, will you consent to marry me, and turn your whole life?”

"When I spoke of silly speeches I never anticipated anything so foolish as that," says Gretchen. "Certainly you have out-heroded Herod. And on an occasion of the kind to address me as Gretchen,—plain Gretchen! Oh, it is out of all keeping! If you cannot find anything better to say, I shall refuse you."

"Then, darling, will you consent to make me happier than I ever again hoped or dreamed I should be?"

"Now, that is much prettier. Yes, I consent. And"—seriously—"I am so glad it is all finally arranged, because I have wanted to tell you for ever so long (only I feared it might be rude, you know, as of course I had no right to interfere) that I can't bear the collars you wear. They are most unbecoming, and I want you to try some other kind."

Dugdale gives way to genuine laughter. Her quaint and instantaneous appropriation of him is inexpressibly dear to him.

"I shall send to town for any collars you may fancy," he says; "but for your own sake I would ask you not to make me uglier than you can help."

She is standing over him at this time, looking down with fond content upon his beautiful face. She seems so pleased, so glad, so utterly fearless of all the future may have in store, that again the old nameless dread chills him,—the morbid distrust of any possible happiness so far as he is concerned,—and his expression changes. Will she always look at him like this? Will the day never come when the beloved face will be averted to hide the unavailing regret that may disfigure it?

"Gretchen, are you sure you understand yourself? For both our sakes, make no mistake now. Are you sure you really love me?—that it is not pity is influencing you in this matter?" asks he, with an anxiety that almost amounts to agony.

"I am quite sure," returns she, with tender solemnity: "there is no room for pity in my heart, it is so filled with love—for you." As she speaks, she lays her hand unconsciously and with pathetic grace upon her heart. He is satisfied.

"Will you kiss me?" he asks, presently. And she kisses him shyly, but with gentle warmth. They both blush a good deal when this obvious duty has been performed; and then

they laugh, and then Gretchen declares the day has been ill used,—that nothing has been done,—and getting a book, insists on reading to him in a rather desultory fashion for half an hour, while he lies silently gazing at her, hearing her voice perhaps, but deaf, I think, to all the sense and meaning in the pages read.

CHAPTER XIII.

VAL. "Love is your master, for he masters you;
And she, that is so yoked by a fool,
Methinks should not be chronicled for wise.

* * * * *

And why not death, rather than living torment?
To die is to be banished from myself,
And Silvia is myself: banished from her
Is self from self,—a deadly banishment!"

Two Gentlemen of Verona.

WHEN Gretchen tells her father of her determination to wed with Dugdale and no other, she fills him with consternation and a sorrow that amount almost to indignation. That she, his pride, the child of his heart, should elect for herself a life so replete with trouble, so wanting in joy or even barest content, grieves him beyond expression.

"I shall never give my consent,—never!" he says, with a wave of the hand, meant to declare that in this instance entreaty will be of no avail. But Gretchen lingers. Not yet—not ever—will she abandon hope. "Perpetual dropping wears away a stone." So she tells herself; and George Tremaine's heart is of any but the adamant order. She will trust to time to conquer for her. She lays her arms upon the table and regards him with melancholy eyes, and asks him, in a dismal monotone, if he, who has professed such affection for her, is to be her undoing. Mr. Tremaine feels the power brought to bear, but steels his heart against it and goes on with admirable firmness:

"I am acting for the best; I am your truest friend," he says, emphasizing each word vigorously. "I distinctly say I will not hear of it."

"Papa, how can you speak so sternly to me? It is not

like you. When you were in love with mamma, what would you have thought of your father if he had forbidden you to marry her? Would you not have called him a—a——”

“You can be as undutiful as you like, Gretchen. That will not help to alter my mind.”

“I am not undutiful. How could you think it? But is it not true? Would you not have called him just that?”

“You would have to spend your time nursing a sick man. At your age! It is unheard of.”

“It is my choice.”

“Which only proves you are too young to make a choice.”

“I am very little younger than Kitty, and you said nothing about her inability to choose,” retorts she, reproachfully.

At this moment the door opens, and Mrs. Tremaine—followed by Flora and Brandrum—appears on the threshold.

“Go away for a while,” says Mr. Tremaine, in a distressed tone, beckoning to them.

“No; let them come in. It must be told sooner or later,” says Gretchen, quickly, though with a face pale as drifting snow. And then the news is told, and nobody says anything; and Mrs. Tremaine, with an inexplicable look upon her face, seats herself in an arm-chair and lays one hand upon the other thoughtfully, silently.

Brandrum clears his throat and glances at Gretchen, who meets his gaze appealingly. Flora, with an ominous cough, sinks into a low seat near the window, and is evidently preparing a mental brief for the coming trial.

“The very idea is outrageous,” says Mr. Tremaine, warmly, vexed that as yet he has received no open support from the new-comers.

“But let us discuss it quietly, my dear George,” suggests Mrs. Tremaine, calmly.

Her calmness, however, which seems to him something like submission to the enemy, only irritates him still further.

“Quietly!” repeats he, with indignation. “You don’t see it in my light, Arabella. Women always take such a wrong view of everything. You, as her mother, ought to forbid her even thinking of such a thing, whereas by your silence you seem almost to give consent. I must say it is most ill judged. What! make a Miss Nightingale of herself at nineteen! Why, she would tire of it in a month.”

"I should not," says Gretchen, faintly but bravely. "I cannot account for it, papa, but I know I love him. I shall never again love any one so well. I would rather spend my life in solitude—in sorrow—with him than in the gayest capital in Europe with another."

"You are a romantic fool," declares Mr. Tremaine, losing temper.

"My dear, my dear! you forget yourself," expostulates his wife.

"And you are encouraging her," goes on he, still further forgetting himself.

"Dearest," says Gretchen, with a smile (when papa's temper goes so does his resolution), "you forget indeed. Only yesterday you told me I was the cleverest of the whole family, and now you have called me—oh, fie! what an ugly word it is! See here: I will not marry him if it so distresses you; but then I shall never marry any one else as long as I live. And old maids are so unpleasant. I should not risk having one always at home if I were you."

"Are you going against me in this matter, Gretchen?" asks poor Mr. Tremaine, at his wits' end. "Why is it? Have I not always been a good father to you?"

"You have, darling,—the best, the dearest." Her arms are round his neck now. Great tears are in her eyes. Few men are proof against the tears of those they love. Mr. Tremaine's features relax. There are visible signs of a speedy surrender, or at least of a compromise.

"Don't be cruel, darling," she whispers, piteously. "You will never forgive yourself if you spoil my life."

"Never," replies he, with deep earnestness, caressing her sunny head. "That is just why I cannot give my consent to this 'mad marriage.' It is too great a sacrifice."

Here Flora, having arranged her line of action, breaks boldly into the conversation. People always listen to Flora, for the simple reason that no one has ever yet been found able to talk her down.

"I don't think it at all a sacrifice," she says, ignoring the consequences of this rash speech. She looks up from her low seat and lays down the book with which she has been trying to cheat some light from the swiftly-parting hours. "Not in the least. And why is it you all think it so? He is sick,

poor Kenneth, and is it not a privilege to be able to comfort those we care for? Gretchen loves him. Therefore she would wish to watch over him and make him happy. And I think it is very sweet and lovely of her to want to do it. It is just the very thing I should like to do myself."

At this outburst they all smile involuntarily,—all, that is, except Gretchen and the young speaker herself, who gaze at each other fondly, with eyes filled with tears. Love and gratitude are awake, and a little chord of sympathy, spreading from heart to heart, makes affection grow warmer and stronger within their breasts.

Then some one else makes some remark, and argument again grows brisk, under cover of which Brandrum—who is still amused, and sees a splendid opening for one of those discussions dear to him—says to Flora, with affected geniality,—

"Your sentiments are mine. Love at any cost. When you are a little older, Flo, I shall look you out a thoroughly battered young man and present him to you as a spouse."

"Thanks; you are really too good. But I sha'n't trouble you. I shall prefer making my own choice when my time comes," says Flora, disagreeably.

"That is a very ungrateful speech, and one utterly undeserved, not to speak of the folly of it. One should never refuse a good offer. Nevertheless, being thoroughly amiable and entirely devoid of malice, I shall insist on helping you in this matter. By the by, this affair in Zululand has happened most fortunately for you. I shouldn't wonder if it produced the desired article. I shall at once set about finding some one suitable."

"Better advertise," says Miss Flora, with grim sarcasm.

"The very thing. Thanks for the suggestion. 'Wanted, a young man carefully mutilated. One without arms and legs and such superfluous luxuries as ears and nose preferred. Must be hopelessly invalided. Of a cheerful and lively disposition, and, above all things, strictly moral. Warranted not to bite. Salary, three ha'pence a year, paid quarterly. Please address Miss Flora Tremaine,' etc. Will that do?"

"I suppose you think you are funny," says Flora, witheringly; but Brandy can soar above sarcasm, and is evidently unimpressed.

"I think that paragraph about the biting very neat," he

says, mildly. "A man must give vent to his feelings in some way; and if he could neither kick you nor beat you he might want to bite you. At all events, it is well to be on the safe side. You see how careful I am of your interests."

Flora, disdaining reply, rises and crosses over to where Gretchen is standing near her father, who is still arguing, though fruitlessly. Gretchen is evidently gaining the day.

"Then you give your consent, papa?"

"I suppose I must. Though, remember, I do so unwillingly."

"And you will speak to Kenneth?—you will say you are very pleased?"

"My dear, I shall certainly speak to him. But there is a limit to human forbearance; I cannot go so far as to say I am pleased."

"You will not be unkind to him, dear?" says Gretchen, a little tremulously, laying her hand pleadingly upon his chest. "Remember how one little cold word will hurt and wound him."

"I sha'n't be brutal, if you mean that," says her father, with a faint smile. "Poor fellow! he has enough to bear, without incivility from me. You shall have it all your own way, Gretchen; but in the after-years, if you fail to find happiness, do not blame me."

"I shall blame nobody. And my happiness will not fail me," replies she, slowly. Her lips are white, but a light soft and beautiful gleams within her azure eyes.

Brandy, coming up behind her, lays both his hands lightly on her shoulders.

"After all," he says, addressing his father, "why shall not Gretchen be happy in her own way? If she wishes to marry Dugdale, if her heart is set on it, who shall forbid her? And something tells me our 'bonny Meg' will never come to much grief."

"No, because Kenneth loves her, and she loves him, and their love will last forever," says Flora,—foolishly, perhaps, but fervently,—adding, "And whom do we know nicer and handsomer than Kenneth?"

"I shall say no more until I have seen Dugdale," says Mr. Tremaine. Then, with some reluctance, "You say you love him, Gretchen. Have you never thought, child, that your

very love will be your misery? His life is ever in the balance; and when death comes to rob you——”

“Oh, no, no! Not that!” cries Gretchen, sharply, throwing out her hands as though to ward off some evil thing. “Anything but that! He will live, with care, with time.”

“I am quite sure of it,” says Flora, with solemn conviction; “I feel it. And when he is able to stand again, and move about, and ride, and shoot, and all that, see how proud we shall be of him. Don’t cry, Gretchen. He must—he will get strong.”

“There is the dressing-bell!” exclaims Mrs. Tremaine, hurriedly. She has been singularly silent during the whole discussion, and now seems—for her—thoroughly unnerved. “We shall be late if we don’t hurry. Brandrum, remember how you kept us all waiting yesterday.”

Brandy, having bestowed a loving, though perhaps slightly too energetic, pat upon Gretchen’s shoulder, leaves the room, his father following. Mrs. Tremaine, going up to her daughter, smooths back the soft brown hair from the girl’s flushed cheeks with excessive tenderness.

“Darling, think,—think well,” she says, earnestly; but that is all the discouragement she offers. As the door closes on her, Gretchen turns to the constant Flora, and, throwing her arms round her, presses her lips to hers with grateful warmth.

“You are the first to take my part, Flo,” she says; “and—and you spoke so nicely of him. I shall never forget that.”

“Well, I said to myself, it was a time when you would want Kitty, and I was determined you shouldn’t miss her, if I could do you any good,” says Flora, heartily.

“Though indeed,” says the youngest Miss Tremaine, doubtfully, when she finds herself alone, “I do hope I have not adopted a wrong course and encouraged my dear sweet in abject folly. My conscience smites me; yet when I love I shall marry my sweetheart, even if he hasn’t a nose on his face. No, whatever comes of my advice, I have at least acted up to my principles. As that miserable boy said, ‘Love at any cost.’ I think the whole thing downright charming and romantic. Just like that beautiful story, ‘The Children of the Abbey,’ and—and—all the rest of them.”

* * * * *

“What can she be marrying him for?” demands Mr.

Tremaine, desperately, many hours later, addressing his wife from the hearth-rug in her bedroom, while she slowly removes her trinkets from her person one by one, "unless for his money? And I didn't think her mercenary."

"She is the truest and purest and best girl in all the world," says Gretchen's mother, indignantly. Perhaps just a touch of remorse and fear makes the indignation in her tone warmer. There is unwonted moisture in her eyes. "She is marrying him simply because she loves him."

"It is unnatural," says Mr. Tremaine, fuming. "And people will say all sorts of unpleasant things. I suppose you are prepared for that? It is no use arguing. I never saw any one so-determined."

"Like all gentle women, when occasion arises she can be firmer than most. I am sure, were he a penniless student instead of being Dugdale of Laxton, she would marry him all the same."

"Then I suppose we ought to be grateful for small mercies, and thank our stars he is not a penniless student," says Mr. Tremaine, with a sigh. "I shall, however, make one more effort in her behalf. I shall appeal to Dugdale."

"Will you, dear? Of course you always know best. I always say you have the clearest judgment of any man I ever met. But will it do any good, do you think? I am afraid it has rather got out of your hands,—gone beyond us, in fact. (Poke the fire, dearest: it is intensely cold to-night.) I fear interference will do no good. But you can try. You are very clever at that sort of thing. Only, don't be too severe with him, poor boy. Remember how delicate he is: he cannot live very long, I am afraid. And, after all, Sleeke and Steele say that only half the property is entailed; and at his death, of course, Gretchen——"

"Oh! hang the property!" interrupts Mr. Tremaine, impatiently. "That won't console her, if she cares for him. I know I shall see that child yet with her cheeks white and her eyes full of silent grief; and when that day comes I shall feel as if it was all my fault; I know I shall," says Mr. Tremaine, irritably.

"Don't think about it any more to-night, dear," says his wife, soothingly. "Things always look blackest at nightfall. To-morrow we can discuss it more fully."

"I shall certainly appeal to Dugdale," says Mr. Tremaine again, still irritable, still with a determination that amounts to courage.

But as

"The silent hours steal on,
And flaky darkness breaks within the east,"

and morning dawns, his courage somewhat ebbs, and, as Bob Acres's might, oozes out through his finger-tips. Indeed, when, some hours later on, he draws near Dugdale's presence, this cowardice increases, until presently he is possessed with an uncomfortable conviction that he is the unwelcome suitor and Dugdale the stern parent before whom he must plead his cause.

As he enters the library and meets Kenneth's anxious eyes he feels, if possible, more like a culprit than before, and sinks heavily into a seat, as though oppressed with hidden crime.

"You have come to speak to me about Gretchen?" says Dugdale, nervously, plunging into the subject head-foremost.

"Yes. I have come to speak to you. Of course I have come, my dear Dugdale," replies Mr. Tremaine, greatly embarrassed. He takes up a paper-knife and examines it slowly and with elaborate care, as though to gain time. "Somebody should speak, you know," he concludes, lamely.

A woman in Dugdale's place would at this juncture—because of Tremaine's palpable inability to proceed—have broken into hysterical and inextinguishable laughter. Dugdale, on the contrary says, with studied calmness,—

"Somebody should, of course."

"Gretchen has told me all about this—this—arrangement between you, and——It is difficult to say anything, but you know, my dear fellow, that—that——"

"I know everything,—all you would say," says Dugdale, calmly, his own nervousness decreasing as he sees his host's increasing. "No man could expect you to give your consent. It is quite impossible for you to give it. I shall say nothing more. But she said she thought she could be happy with me in spite of everything; and sometimes I try to cheat myself into the belief that she could. At least I had not courage to fling away this only chance of having her always near me. It seems absurd, does it not, my talking of love?"

But I do love her ; she is my entire happiness. Lend her to me for a few years. Perhaps I shall release you from your bargain even before that time has expired."

"If," says Mr. Tremaine, "there was even a chance that in two or three years you might recover——"

"I shall not recover,"—quietly,—"but I shall die ; that will do almost as well, will it not?"

"My dear boy, don't,"—uneasily. "It is very depressing, and must be uncommonly bad for you, you know, encouraging such dismal reflections. Death is a sort of thing we none of us like to dwell on."

"You do not, perhaps: why should you? But I think of it constantly, more than ever of late, as is natural. Gretchen is so young. She will be only a girl still when"—with a smile—"I am gathered to my fathers. I have thought it all over. It is at least in my power to leave her rich: there is no reason why she should not marry again then and be happy later on. Though I would not have her quite forget me,—not quite. I think she will never quite forget me,"—with a faint sigh.

"I hope she will never get the chance," says Mr. Tremaine (utterly forgetful of his purpose), blowing his nose sonorously. Getting up, he walks to the window, and for a few minutes "silence reigns supreme."

"What will the world say?" he goes on, presently. "I have heard women called mercenary for far less."

"Gretchen is not one to be distressed by the adverse opinion of society."

"Dugdale, let me say something for your own sake, as much as for hers. The child is young,—only nineteen ; she has been nowhere, has seen very few ; she hardly realizes what life means. Suppose she should weary of attending a sick man ; suppose—I am only supposing, my dear fellow—but should she see any one to prefer to you, what then?"

"That is my risk," says Dugdale, sadly. "Do you think I am fool enough not to have thought of that? But I accept it. Besides,"—turning his eyes on Tremaine,—"*think me over-sanguine if you will, but something tells me that will never happen.*"

"*'She is a woman,'*" quotes her father, "*'and therefore may be won,'* and she is, in my opinion, the handsomest of

the lot. The odds are heavily against you, my dear fellow. I know her too well to distrust her in any way, or to believe her mind capable of a wrong thought, but if things turn out as I fear she will be miserable; the day will come, perhaps, when she will reproach you."

"What is all this about reproach? Don't mind papa; he is a raven, always croaking; he is only trying to frighten you," says Gretchen's clear voice, breaking in most opportunely upon the discussion. Coming forward, she leans lightly upon the head of Dugdale's couch and pats his cheek gayly. "I won't have you say nasty things to Ken, papa: he is my property now, and I shall do battle for him."

Her father laughs, and so does she. Kenneth, drawing down her hand to his lips, kisses it fondly.

* * * * *

"I never heard of such a love-affair in my life," says Mr. Tremaine afterwards, with a groan. "If he was the finest fellow in the United Kingdom she could not appear prouder of him. And as for him,—well, of course, you know, he would be silly about her: that is not to be wondered at."

CHAPTER XIV.

"I have not art to reckon my groans: but that I love thee best, O most best, believe it. Adieu."—*Hamlet's letter.*

It is New Year's Day. The Old Year—perhaps glad of its release—is safely buried 'neath a frozen shroud,—gone,—forgotten. The young king has arrived in state with chill and piercing majesty, his throne an iceberg, his cradle snow. As far as the eye can see, it rests upon a world all robed in white, on which a wintry sun looks sadly down, glinting its breast with myriad rays, until all the land seems to scintillate and sparkle with countless diamonds.

The great strong branches of the fir-trees are bowed down and almost touch the earth with the dead weight of the snow that clings to them. The music of stream and river is hushed. All are ice-bound, and, if they sing at all, croon

melancholy ditties in the dark of joys departed and summers all too swiftly flown.

In-doors the fires burn briskly, dancing and roaring in the exuberance of their delight. Near them small baskets may be seen in which poor little starving birds—that have come to die upon the window-sills—have been placed by Flo and Gretchen. Some are slowly recovering, and peep out from under their wings in a stealthy fashion. Some, alas! are lying with tiny legs outstretched and brown eyes glazed and dim.

Brandy and Dandy—who has run down for a day or two—are playing billiards. Dugdale, having changed his quarters, is now an inhabitant of the morning-room, and lies upon his couch watching with new-born content the jolly yellow flames that rush madly up the chimney as the great yule log grows less.

Gretchen has written a little note to Kitty explaining everything, and touching so sweetly upon her love for poor Kenneth that Kitty—though deeply grieved—cannot but sympathize with her. Of course the letter is read to Jack (never, if you have any sense, write a letter of a private nature to any woman until she has been married twelve months), and Jack, lounging lazily out of the window, a cigar between his lips, declines to see the sentimental side of it.

"It is monstrous," declares he between each satisfactory puff, "odious!" Then, in a remorseful tone, "Poor old Dugdale! what a handsome fellow he was once! and now ——— When I think of Gretchen, with her face, her beauty, it seems unnatural."

"She loves him,"—pathetically.

"So she thinks now, and will, probably, until she meets some one else who——"

"Jack,"—severely,— "you must not talk so of Gretchen."

"It is treason, I allow, and I beg her pardon humbly; but she isn't an angel yet, my dear Kitty. There are many who will discuss this marriage unkindly and say she accepted him for the sake of filthy lucre."

"No one who knows Gretchen can say that."

"Possibly. But how many do not know her? They will talk, and no one can prevent them while our laws are in their present imperfect state."

"There is a certain class of persons who will not believe

in any such thing as disinterested love, and who, had poor Kenneth been strong and well, would say just the same,—that she is marrying him for his fifteen thousand a year, and nothing else. Why,"—waxing warm in her argument,—“I dare say they said I married you because you were master of Coolmore.”

“Impossible, my dear child,” says Blunden, drawing himself up to his full height, which is superb. “What! Do you think when a woman (as in your case) makes an Adonis her husband that outsiders attribute to her any baser motive for her choice than ‘pure, pure love’? Surely your intellect grows weak. Your senses wander.”

“Conceited boy!” replies she, fondly, slipping a white arm round his neck; and, as they pass away from Gretchen, let us return to her.

Off the morning-room where Dugdale lies opens the smaller drawing-room, and beyond it stretches another suite of apartments. Gretchen, coming softly in, distracts him and dashes all his “Spanish castles” to little bits.

She is dressed in black velvet, long and sweeping, with a rich *balayouse* at the tail that helps to define it in the twilight. Round her throat a soft tucker of rich old lace nestles warmly, as though in love with its resting-place, while at her wrists some of the same lace falls partly over her hands. The dead black of the gown contrasts admirably with the cream-like fairness of her skin, and seems to give even a warmer shade to her deep violet eyes.

“Why, what a charming vision!” says Kenneth. “What a very splendid apparition! I feel honored, sweet madam, by a visit from such a queen of fashion.”

“Ah! I knew you would like it,” says Gretchen, pleased. “Velvet”—naïvely—“is so becoming.”

“It suits you to perfection. Indeed, it harmonizes with you in every respect, being not only lovely to look at but soft and delicate. Now, is not that a pretty compliment, and quite an impromptu?”

“Very. You cover me with confusion. I am glad you admire me.”

“Is that knowledge so new to you? When is it, I wonder, I do not admire you? But to-night my admiration knows no bounds. I like to see you beautifully dressed.”

"I always said you were a most estimable young man," says Miss Tremaine, saucily. "When we are married you shall gratify that amiable fancy as often as you choose, and I for one shall not quarrel with you. I am a perfect baby about dress. I like getting charming gowns, and trying them on, and seeing how irresistible I can look."

She is standing before a long mirror with her hands behind her back, and is evidently delighted with what she sees therein.

"You like my frills?"—touching her lace.

"Tremendously."

"Kitty sent them from Naples."

"Kitty has always good taste."

"Exquisite. Yes, it is pretty, I think, this gown,"—turning her head a little to one side, the better to mark the effect. "And—yes—extremely becoming."

"Come here, you vain child, and talk to me. I am growing jealous of that glass."

"Spare me yet a moment,"—laughing. "It is not often I see anything so nice; and, to tell you the truth, this is almost the first time I have really seen myself in this costume."

"What! You bandaged your eyes when dressing! How self-denying!"

"How satirical!"—with a little *moue*. "No, but it only came home this morning, all the way from Paris (a *bon bon* from papa for the New Year), and I had no time to try it on until just now; and just now, when I got into it, I gave one little hurried glance at myself, and—it was enough!"—throwing out her hands with an affected but charming gesture. "I said to myself, unselfishly, 'Dear Ken must at once be gratified with a peep at this delicious picture;' and I hastened downstairs, regardless of my own feelings, and here I am! Now, do say I am the prettiest creature you ever saw in your life. It is very dark, so you can imagine you are telling the truth."

"It would be the truth if a thousand lamps were burning."

"Gratitude alone would make me love you," says Miss Tremaine, who is in her gayest mood. "Ah! I had nearly forgotten. See, I brought you these violets: are they not early? and are they not sweet?"

As she speaks, she detaches them from the bosom of her

dress, where they contrast prettily with the soft black ground beneath.

"If I rob you of them I shall spoil your appearance, shall I not?"—hastily. "See how well they look in your gown."

"They will look much better in this little vase at your elbow, and I shall be glad to think you have them. I must run away and write to Kitty while this little despicable gleam of daylight lasts."

"Don't be long," says Kenneth.

"You mustn't be lonely. I shall write in the next room, quite close to you," says Gretchen, glad at heart that her presence is so necessary to his happiness.

"I am always lonely when my eyes cannot rest on you," replies he, with such unmistakable sincerity that Gretchen, after a faint hesitation (prompted either by her own heart or by something in his eyes), stoops and presses her lips to his.

"I sha'n't put any postscript to Kitty's letter," she says, with a little laugh: "so you may expect me back before you have time to miss me."

I don't think Kitty gets a very explanatory or a very coherent letter, if one may judge by the way it is scribbled and hurried over. As she is in the act of directing it, the small drawing-room door is thrown open, and Captain Scarlett is announced.

"Just come over to wish you a Happy New Year," says Tom, brightly, yet with a curious excitement in his manner, advancing to clasp her hand. "Knew you'd be at home to-day, you know. Have been rather unfortunate in that respect of late, eh? Well—er—hope your New Year will be happy, you know,—happier than the last, and all that; though I dare say that was pretty jolly, eh?"

"I wish you the same, Tom," says Gretchen, sweetly, not taking it in bad part that he seems inclined to dis sever her arm from her body. "I was just writing to Kitty, and I sent her your love, even without your permission, because I knew you would like me to do it."

"It was uncommon good of you to think of me at all," says Tom Scarlett.

Then conversation grows wider; and presently Gretchen, remembering her promise to return quickly to Dugdale, rises.

"Of course you will dine?" she says. "But will you

excuse me a while? I—I have something to do. Brandy and Dandy are in the billiard-room: go and have a game and a cigar with them before dinner."

"Oh, thank you. I'm afraid I'm hardly fit, you know"—with an expressive glance at his clothes. "If I had only known, I might—— But you are sure you won't mind?"

"I sha'n't mind anything but your refusal to stay," returns Gretchen, with such an amount of mistaken kindness in her tone as hurries the young man swiftly to his fate. As she speaks she moves towards the door.

"Don't go yet. Not yet. Not for one moment," entreats he, following her. "I have something to tell you."

Gretchen, smiling, unconscious, stops to listen.

"I hope it isn't a very weighty secret," she says, with an adorable smile.

"Don't you know what it is?" says Scarlett, eagerly.

"Gretchen, I—I—love you!"

"Oh, no! I hope not that," says Gretchen, earnestly.

"Do not say another word."

"It is that," goes on Scarlett, hurriedly, "and (forgive me, but I must speak) all last winter I kept silence, because I had nothing worth offering you; but now by my poor cousin's death (as you know) I am heir to eight thousand a year, and a title (though only a small one, I allow); and——"

"Why will you go on?" says Gretchen, greatly distressed. "If I liked you, Tom, it would be nothing to me whether you had eight thousand or eight hundred a year; and as for a title, that would never count. No, I cannot listen to you."

"But why? At one time I thought—I hoped——"

Something in her face checks him. Then he says, passionately,—

"It can't be true what I have heard. It is impossible."

"What have you heard?" asks she, gravely.

"That you are engaged to Dugdale."

"It is quite true," says Gretchen, simply.

"True! You must be mad. Oh, Gretchen, pause,—pause before it is too late. Why will you do yourself such an injury? The very thought of it is horrible."

"Hush!" says Gretchen, growing very pale. "Why should we quarrel? No words can alter my decision."

"Has no one spoken to you? Has no one tried to dissuade you from this insane act?" says Scarlett, losing his head. "Well, I at least shall do what I can; I shall open your eyes to——"

"No, you will not open my eyes," says Gretchen, with a very gentle dignity, "because there is nothing to see. I am not blindfold. I know all you would tell me: it has been said to me so many times. You think it, perhaps, a terrible thing that I should, comparatively speaking, give up gayety,—that is, a London season, a few operas, a little amusement, here and there. But to me that is nothing. I like the fun of this world as well as another, but I think I prefer a country life to any other, and there I shall have my poor people always,—and always—my poor Kenneth!"

In her expressive eyes there is a sweetness, an intolerable satisfaction, that maddens Scarlett. As she moves towards the door and enters the next room, where Kenneth lies expecting her return, he follows her, hardly knowing what it is he intends doing, until at length they both stand by Dugdale's side.

It is impossible to misunderstand that something untoward has happened. Gretchen's eyes are full of painful anxiety; Scarlett is pale, and his lips are firmly compressed. Dugdale, after a brief study of both their features, fixes his gaze earnestly on Gretchen.

"Let me speak," says Scarlett, in a tone impossible to translate. "Is it true what she says, that she is going to marry you? If so, I think you ought to forbid what——"

"Tom, do not say another word," says Gretchen, laying one hand suggestively on Kenneth's shoulder.

"I should like to hear him," says Dugdale, quickly, his breath coming a little hard. "What is it, Scarlett?"

"I too love her," says Scarlett, recklessly. "That is nothing to wonder at, is it? Before she met you I had some chance, I think, but you have supplanted me. And—what is it she is gaining?"

"It is all a mistake," interrupts Gretchen, hurriedly. "I could never have married you,—never."

"So you think now; but I might have won you: I cannot forget that. Do you think"—addressing himself passionately to Dugdale—"the life she has chosen will give her

happiness? Dugdale, your selfishness will be your ruin. The day will come when she will demand reparation for all——”

“Be silent,” murmurs Gretchen, with some indignation. But Dugdale detains her.

“You are unjust. Let us hear him,” he says, quietly. “It is all quite true.” As he speaks, he covers his face with his hand.

“It is all untrue, every word of it,” exclaims Gretchen, pale and trembling. Stooping, she presses her lips against the back of the hand that shields his face. “It is cruel. It is unmanly. Go on, sir” (to Scarlett): “we shall listen; although you have insulted us as deeply as even you can desire.”

This, coming from the gentle Gretchen, is terrible. Scarlett is sobered.

“Perhaps I have said too much,” he says, hanging his head and fidgeting nervously with his watch-chain; “but”—with an appealing glance at Miss Tremaine—“when I think of all I have lost I feel half mad and cannot measure my words.”

“One must possess a thing before one can lose it,” says Gretchen, coldly. “If you have nothing else you wish to say, it will be better to leave us. Go, sir.” Pointing to the door.

“Forgive me, Gretchen. Surely I have not sinned past all forgiveness?” says Scarlett, desperately. Going nearer, he actually falls upon his knees before her, oblivious of ridicule, and attempts to take her hand.

“I shall never forgive you,—never,” replies she, for once in all her kind sweet life most cruelly unrelenting. Her tone is low and calm; but her eyes betray her. It is clear she cannot pardon the pain inflicted on the man she loves. “I bid you go. Obey me,” she says, still with hand outstretched towards the door.

Rising from his knees, without another word, he does obey her, and presently she and Dugdale are again alone. With gentle force she compels him to look at her.

“Why should it vex you?” he says, gently. “There was reason in everything he said. The time may come when you will repent.”

"Now let me speak once for all," says Gretchen, with some quickness of manner, which in her denotes irritation. "If you do not wish to marry me, why then it is all over, and I shall be miserable. But I can bear it. But what I cannot bear is to be doubted every day. You believe I can't be happy with you, and I believe I can. It is for you now to decide."

"No, not for me. The advantage is all on my side. I am only a——"

"Oh, hush!"

"You can't bear to hear the truth, yet you think you can witness it daily without repugnance. What right has a fellow in my position to gain the affection of any one, least of all of——"

"I know,"—impatiently,— "a goddess among women, such as I am! You are nearly as silly as Tom Scarlett. I appreciate myself fully, I assure you, but yet"—with a short laugh that is full of petulance—"I suppose even a goddess has a heart, and may bestow it where she pleases, either on king or on peasant. I have bestowed mine on you. If you do not care for the poor thing, why, return it; but at least do not abuse the gift. After all, Ken, I don't believe you half love me."

At this he laughs too, as at a speech too foolish to be taken seriously.

"Yes, I am quite in earnest. Surely now you ought to be convinced that I know my own mind? Here comes Captain Scarlett (I don't think I shall ever call him 'Tom' again), laying at my feet a title, and yet I prefer you."

"You might have liked him, if——"

"I might, of course; but I don't think so. Tom has a temper. Why, his love is a sort of whirlwind: it quite takes away one's breath."

"When your people hear of this last proposal they will be even more averse to our marriage than they are now."

"Then my people shall not hear of it," says Gretchen, with decision.

CHAPTER XV.

"Such a mad marriage never was before."—*Taming of the Shrew.*

So on a dull sad day in early February they are married. The skies are overcast; the earth has lost all heart, and holds not up its head; the rain falls with dismal patterings upon gravel and terraces outside. A fair day for a corpse,—a sorry one for a bride.

Our bride—Gretchen—is dressed in light-blue velvet, and looks absolutely lovely,—so much so that her father, regarding her with unavailing sorrow, almost groans aloud. Mrs. Tremaine is flushed, and appears harassed and ill at ease, as one might look whose night had been sleepless and filled with troublous thoughts. Brandy and Dandy, who are both present, are unusually silent, and hardly even exchange glances. Indeed, it is the one occasion on record on which they remain speechless when they might air their valuable opinions.

Every one seems more or less depressed, except Gretchen herself, who, though pale, is happy, and in whose downcast eyes lies an expression of tender satisfaction not to be mistaken.

The ceremony takes place in the drawing-room at Laxton, —to which place Dugdale returned a week ago,—and the old rector who christened Gretchen now marries her,—sorely, though secretly, against his will.

Dugdale is quite composed, but grave and silent, and singularly free from all appearance of the joy that should crown a successful lover. Only once, as the words "till death us do part" fall upon his ears, does anything like gladness show itself in his face. Involuntarily his fingers tighten upon Gretchen's, and a faint smile curves his lips. Remorse and relief are both expressed in this smile. It is as though he would assure her that, if in the present he wrongs her, reparation will shortly be made. But Gretchen, with her serious eyes fixed upon the old priest's face, sees nothing of it.

Then it is all over, and the blessing is pronounced, and the

clergyman closes the book slowly, and Gretchen Tremaine is no more, and Gretchen Dugdale stands beside her husband.

They all tenderly embrace her; and, though the word "congratulate" is not heard, they wish her happiness,—in tones that falter, but that are at least sincere. After which the carriages are ordered, and the moment of parting comes.

Perhaps at the very last the poor child clings to her father, and as his kind arms close around her remembers, with a little faintness of the heart, all the good days gone by, all the tender love and warmth of her home, nay, even the little angry squabbles that now seem so dear to her. As she recalls these past hours, sobs rise within her throat, but by a supreme effort she subdues them, and, but for the tears that enlarge her eyes, gives way to no emotion.

"Good-by again, mamma," she says, following her mother into the grand old hall to give her a last caress. "I want to tell you, dear," she whispers, hurriedly, "that I shall always remember how you never said a word against him, or spoke disparagingly of my choice, or dissuaded me in any way from my marriage."

Each word meant so kindly falls like a drop of molten lead upon the mother's heart.

"Gretchen," she says, in a low, studied tone, that yet has in it a fear that amounts almost to passion, "try to be happy, if only for my sake. I hardly know what I have done. But if regret follows on this day it will kill me."

"Why, darling, you forget," returns Gretchen, with surprise; "I have my heart's desire. I am quite—quite happy."

Then Brandy and Dandy (who is beginning to believe himself one of the family, on the strength of officiating at all these weddings) kiss her fondly. And Brandy bestows a last energetic slap upon her shoulder and tells her to "keep up her courage," and then they all depart, carrying Flora with them, who, "like Niobe, is all tears," and Gretchen returns to her husband's side.

"It is all over," says Kenneth.

"Yes, well over," returns she, smiling. He is extremely pale, and looks dispirited. "How nervous it makes one—does it not?" she says, purposely, with a slight sigh. "A ceremony of any sort, I mean. Once, I confess, I almost cried.

You look upset too, Ken ; but we must not be melancholy on our wedding-day, must we ? And see—even the afternoon is going to be good to us."

The day has indeed changed. The clouds have all dispersed and are quickly disappearing. From behind them the sun is peeping forth, and is sending a cold but welcome greeting to the cheerless earth. Through the window a pale gleam comes, and, lighting on the bride, "gives her good-morrow."

"Is not that a very delicate attention on the part of the sun ?" she says, gayly. "We are going to have a charming evening. Do you feel as if you had just been married, Ken ?—I don't a bit."

"I do," says Dugdale. "We are married,—irretrievably so."

"What a dismal tone !" says Gretchen, with a merry laugh. "I don't think you are a very flattering bridegroom. And, now I am your wife, I warn you I shall be a fearful tyrant, and I shall forbid any tones but those of the sweetest description. I think I shall run out and see if there are any violets in your—in my garden. Oh, I wonder where Hardy put my garden-hat this morning ? I hope she hasn't forgotten it. You see"—saucily—"I am making myself quite at home."

"Have you really no regret ?" asks he, earnestly, as though in secret wonder, yet evidently greatly cheered by the brightness and gladness of her manner. "No longing for something in your old life that I cannot give you ?"

"Well, to make humble confession, there really is one thing," says Mrs. Dugdale, demurely : "I have a solitary regret, but it is a supreme one : I left a whole box full of the most enchanting burnt almonds upon my dressing-table this morning that Dandy brought me from town, and I know I shall never see them again, as Brandy and Flora will eat them. Is it not heart-rending ? When I think of it I could almost 'weep my spirit from mine eyes.'"

"You certainly are an afflicted being," says Kenneth, and then they both laugh, and Gretchen begins to wonder when luncheon will be ready, as she really ate nothing at the *déjeuner* an hour ago, and is now very hungry indeed.

So tenderly, so sweetly, so merrily does she play her part that Dugdale's heart revives, and a blessed peace and a happiness beyond all words fill his breast.

CHAPTER XVI.

"True hope is swift, and flies with swallow's wings;
Kings it makes gods, and meaner creatures kings."

Richard III.

AND time but increases his happiness. For Gretchen's love and care and sweet content grows daily, showing no sign of weakness or decay.

Winter has been conquered and lies low, and Spring usurps the throne, casting abroad its universal smile.

April has laughed and wept its merry hour away, and it is now May,—

"The flowery May, who from her green lap throws
The yellow cowslip and the pale primrose."

Deep in the hedgerows these latter flowers are shining in great clusters like myriad stars, emitting a delicate perfume that pervades the soft wind as their frail leaves open.

"Songbirds are winging
Through the balmy air,"

their tender notes of praise and triumph and delight making still sweeter the fragrant breath of morn. "The sun looks on the world with glorious eye," and all living things seem to bask and grow and ripen under its touch.

The clock on the chimney-piece has just chimed nine strokes; and Gretchen, with an early cup of chocolate on a small table near her, is leaning back in a chair before her bedroom fire, "gowned in pure white," and with the post upon her lap.

A letter from Kitty is open in her hand, the contents of which have plainly interested her in a more than ordinary degree, as her face is full of thought, and her eyes, though apparently intent upon the glowing coals, see nothing visible, but are travelling far away into the misty future.

Lady Blunden's news is varied and diffuse. She and Sir

John are now in London; and, the season being well commenced, she has plenty of gossip to disseminate.

Arthur Blunden is on his way home from the East, and may be expected in town at any moment. Brandy is stationed near town; and, as Dandy is staying with his aunt at South Kensington, the inseparables are happy. The season is pretty fair so far, but not so well as usual, the weather is behaving itself so badly—and the war has created a dulness—and Her Royal Highness—etc., etc. Georgie Harcourt is to marry the duke, they say, but no one quite believes it yet,—she is so extremely plain, in spite of her lovely smile. The house in Belgrave Square is very charming,—all there is, indeed, of the most desirable; and she is very happy,—quite happy,—but might be even more so if she could only have her dearest Gretchen near her for a little time; and so on.

There is, perhaps, a greater use of the pronoun "I" than "we" in this letter than in the former ones, but still it is bright and joyous and full of affection. Then, just at the end, comes the passage that has roused in Gretchen's heart a hope strong and precious,—a hope so terrible in its greatness as to cause its possessor pain.

"There is in town just now a doctor wonderfully clever, they tell me, about the spine. He is quite young, and has started up from no one knows where, but is very talented; at least, he has completely cured that boy of the Wainscots' who was considered, you may remember, a hopeless case. When I hear him spoken of I cannot help thinking of poor Kenneth. If he could do him any good, what a blessed thing it would be for you, my darling girl! It appears he has studied the subject deeply,—has, in fact, given up his whole time to it,—and has some method of his own for strengthening diseased spines learned in some German school. Why not bring Kenneth up to town, if only to see him? I would say have him down; but if Ken were on the spot always it would be better. Think it over, dearest; but do not be too sanguine,—disappointment afterwards is always so severe, so much worse than the original evil."

Gretchen's hand crumples the letter almost unconsciously. Oh, if he could be cured! If this young man could only give him back his health and strength,—nay, even some of

his strength,—how grateful, how passionately thankful, she would be!

All day she carries the letter in her bosom, not showing it to Dugdale, but vaguely dreaming of its contents, and weaving plans that perhaps may never come to maturity, but still "are sweet in sowing."

She is silent and *distract* during the evening, sometimes hardly hearing Kenneth when he addresses her. Once or twice he surprises her with tears in her eyes,—eyes fixed upon him with wistful longing. It may be that all her hopes and fond fancies are but dreams, fated to melt with the first dawn of day, but at least they yield her for the time being "a dear delight," and make her pulses throb and her heart beat quickly.

"Sorrow may reign for a night." The words haunt her and pursue her from room to room. What if her sorrow should cease some night "and joy come up with the day"?

Tossing in her bed, counting the weary hours, Gretchen lies awake, still thinking of this new star that has arisen in London. With night has come a touch of despair. Now she wonders how she shall persuade Kenneth to see this doctor, and again asks herself whether any good will—or can—come of the attempt if made. It will only torment and worry him to take him up to town, if indeed he even consents to go; and yet—

At this particular moment a faint moan reaches her ear. Her door is open. Starting up in bed, she raises the night-lamp beside her, and listens attentively, with beating heart.

Again the sound comes to her, made louder by the awful stillness of the night; and, springing from her bed, she thrusts her naked feet into her slippers, flings a dressing-gown over her, and, taking up the lamp, enters the passage that divides her room from Kenneth's. His door is partly unclosed; inside a faint light burns dimly; and as with soft footfalls she crosses the threshold she can see that he is awake, his arms flung above his head.

He is deadly pale; great drops of dew lie upon his forehead; one of his hands is clenched.

"Kenneth," murmurs she, in a terrified tone, hastening to his side. Opening his eyes with a start, he turns his face towards her.

"My darling, is it you?" he asks, with evident surprise. His voice is like his own, but weaker. Plainly the paroxysm is past.

"Yes—yes. The doors were open, and I heard you moan," returns she, deeply agitated. "What is it, Ken? What can I do for you?"

"I am all right again. It was the old pain in my back, and rather sharper than usual,"—with a sigh of exhaustion. "It goes as suddenly as it comes."

"But to suffer all alone! Why did you not ring for Barker?"

"I hate bother—and Barker, on such occasions," says Kenneth, with a languid smile. "I have been so much better of late, I have got out of the way of calling him. My dearest child, I am sorry I disturbed you; but I thought all the doors were fastened. Don't look so frightened: the pain has almost gone. But before you go will you give me those drops on the table over there, as you have come to do me good?"

"Why did you not call me sooner?"—reproachfully.

"What! wake you from your sleep? Better Barker a thousand times. Do you think I would give you so much trouble?"

"Kenneth," exclaims she, deeply pained, "when will you learn to regard me as your wife? Can there be trouble in helping those we love? Do you think I should hesitate to give you trouble if I were in pain? No: I should say to myself, 'It will be his joy to comfort me.'"

There are tears in her soft eyes; her hand trembles slightly as she holds out to him the glass containing the desired drops.

"But then consider how little I can do for you. The bargain is not equal," returns he, sadly.

She shakes her head in dissent and watches him in silence as he drinks eagerly what she has measured out for him.

"You are really better?"

"Quite better. Go back to bed, darling; you are catching cold standing there."

"I thought those attacks had left you forever," she says, wistfully, a sore trouble tugging at her heartstrings.

"I thought so too. But it is nothing. I may not have

another attack for a long time again. Forget it, Gretchen, and return to dream land."

"Dreams are madness when one must face reality, however horrible," says she, with a quickness that has something in it of despair. She has placed her lamp upon the table, and is standing with her small white hands clasped before her, her snowy cashmere gown embroidered in pale blue hanging in straight folds around her, yet hardly concealing the dainty naked feet beneath. She looks like some mediæval saint wrapt in grief.

Going nearer to him she gently removes his pillow, shakes it, and returns it to its place beneath his head. But for this action, which somewhat relieves her, she feels she must give way to the emotion that is choking her.

"Try to sleep," she says, tremulously, kissing him.

"If only to please you," he promises, with a smile.

"Shall I lower your lamp?"

"Thank you. Good-night, my gentle nurse."

"Good-night, my dear," whispers she, a world of tenderness in the common old-fashioned term of endearment; and then they kiss each other again, and she walks away from him, lamp in hand; while he watches silently her lissom figure, clad in its trailing draperies, and likens her in his heart to some fair angel of old, with her soft brown hair half unbound, and her light burning; until at last she steps beyond his sight, and the perfect picture is lost to him.

* * * * *

This symptom of increasing weakness on the part of Dugdale frightens Gretchen, and strengthens her in her half-formed resolution to seek for him new advice. Hitherto he has been recklessly despairing, and (after the first disheartening opinion given by a doctor on the spot at the time of his accident) has obstinately refused all medical or surgical treatment and examination. Gretchen determines to combat this obstinacy; and next morning, when they are both in the room they most affect,—the room where first he saw her,—she says, suddenly, without looking at him,—

"Ken, do you know I think I should like to go to London this season?"

A faint pause ensues. There is the rustling as of a hastily-turned leaf,—a quickly-drawn breath,—no more. Has it

come so soon, then? Has weariness at last made itself felt?

After a while, with his face averted, he says, kindly,—

"Certainly, darling. It will do you good to escape from this stupid place for a little time; you will come back all the happier for the change."

"Yes, dear," says Gretchen, equably, who reads him like a book.

"Where will you go?—to your mother, or to Kitty? Kitty will be better fun."

"To neither,"—with pretty raised brows of astonishment. "Why should I? Have I not your house in Berkeley Square you have so often described to me? I quite long to see it. Why need I trouble any one, when I have such a pretty home of my own to go to?"

"True. But I fear it will be lonely for you. Such a big house, and no one in it but yourself. You will find it dull."

"Am I ever dull with you, dearest?"—with gentle malice.

"With me!"—turning to look at her as she sits on the favorite low seat beside him, her arms embracing her knees, her eyes gazing innocently into his. "What shall I have to do with it?"

"Why, you will be with me, of course."

"You meant me to go to London too?"

"Naturally. Should I go without you? I should feel lost,—utterly undone. Why, you are part of myself; I cannot do without you. You must come, Ken."

The almost agony of regret that had grown within his eyes vanishes at her words. A happy light shines there instead, and yet he answers, impulsively,—

"Oh, Gretchen, impossible!"

"It is?"—quietly. "Very well, then we can stay at home and enjoy our spring and summer in the sweet country. What shall I read you now?"

"No, do not read," interrupts he, quickly, laying his hand upon the open page that rests upon her knee. "I want to talk,—to think."

Gretchen obediently closes the volume and gazes meditatively out of the window. She lets the faintest shadow of disappointment show itself on her brow, knowing that he is earnestly regarding her, and, with the mean intention of ren-

dering him still more uneasy, sighs profoundly, but with seeming unconsciousness.

"You want to go to town," he says, at last, breaking the silence.

"Just a little. Not so badly that I cannot content myself at home, if you will not go."

"Why not go without me, if only for two months? I should not miss you much. At least I should manage to get on without you,—to live until your return."

"I never knew you unkind to me before," retorts she, her eyes filling with tears. "I was foolish enough to think you *would* miss me,—that you could not get on without me. I flattered myself, it seems."

Taking her hand he presses it to his lips.

"Forgive my lying," he says, softly. "I didn't mean a word of it. I should be miserable if left for one day without you; but I want you to enjoy yourself."

"Yet you will not help me to it,"—reproachfully.

"Do I not? I say go."

"And I say I cannot enjoy myself without you: so there is no use in going."

"Must I go, then?"

"No. We can stay here and be quite happy."

"On the contrary, we can go there and be quite happy. You shall take me where you like, Gretchen, as it seems I am necessary to you. You will never know how proud and thankful that thought makes me. Yes, we shall go to town, my dearest, and I shall find pleasure in hearing your praises said and sung."

"It is a bargain!" cries she, clapping her hands joyfully.

"It is my victory, Kenneth, but the reward shall be yours!"

"What an oracular speech! Why, you might be a priestess of the gods, your words are so difficult to read. Yours the victory, but mine the wreath. Well, so be it."

CHAPTER XVII.

BOTTOM.—“Are we all met?”

QUINCE.—“Pat, pat: and here’s a marvellous convenient place for our rehearsal.”—*Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

THE rooms and staircases are crowded. Sweet flowers give forth their richest perfumes ere they perish. Only this morning they raised their heads to smile upon a country sun: now, plucked ruthlessly by careless hands, they have reached the town but to die. Some one is singing in the distance, and every now and then the clear notes come to those outsiders unhappy enough to be almost beyond hearing.

Her Grace of Shropshire is “at home” to-day, and all the world of London is assembled in her house. She is a short, emphatic old woman of about sixty-five, acknowledged by all to have the bluest blood and the vilest temper in Christendom; indeed, no one disputes the fact that she is the rudest old person in England, or out of it. Lady Jane, her only daughter, plain and unpleasant as herself, is quite after her own heart in every way, and is a terror to the society in which they mingle. They both go in heavily for charity, and Methodism, and so forth, and are universally detested. The duke is an honest, kind-hearted gentleman, who never lives with his wife unless when he can’t help it, and who when in “durance vile” is hardly recognizable by his intimates, so crushed and forlorn does he appear, morally and physically.

For a moment the music has ceased, and the sound of voices and subdued laughter makes itself heard. Pretty women are smiling and coquetting, darting barbed arrows disguised in honey at luckless men who hardly know what a *mauvais quart d’heure* is in store for them when the end comes; and the prettiest of them all is seated at the very end of one of the long rooms in a chair that might almost be mistaken for a throne, so surrounded is it by satellites and courtiers.

She is small, and fair, and lovely, and so young as to make one hesitate whether to call her child or woman. Her eyes

are sapphire blue, her hair golden ; her parted lips, gay with smiles, are rich and ripe as cherries. There is an innocence of expression, a childish playfulness and petulance about her, that bewitches and ensnares and torments in a breath.

She is in reality twenty-two, but, in spite of being wife and widow, looks only eighteen, and holds more hearts to play with in the hollow of her small white hand than any other woman in London. There are many handsomer, a few, perhaps, more strictly lovely, but none so enchanting and (by the power of her witcheries and *diableries*) so dangerous as Fancy Charteris.

One or two men, feeling themselves, perhaps, *de trop*, drop away, and presently Mrs. Charteris finds herself alone with Sir John Blunden leaning over her chair. She is smiling, and displaying all her perfect teeth, and gazing into Sir John's eyes with unmistakable kindness ; and Sir John is returning the glance with interest, as Lady Blunden sweeps up the room towards Gretchen, who in a window is listening with sweet attention to a dreadful old woman, who *will* tell her all about the ill-fated grand-nephew killed in the unfortunate affair at Isandula. (As a rule, people always inflict their grievances upon Gretchen,—which is somewhat hard on her.)

Kitty's mouth grows a little hard, and her color fades, as she notes Mrs. Charteris's smile. Drawing her head rather higher, she quickens her steps, and, gaining Gretchen's side, routs the old lady near her,—ghastly reminiscences and all, with great slaughter, driving her from the field with small delay.

"You have just come?" says Gretchen. "I have been looking for you for half an hour."

"Yes ; I had to go to inquire for Aunt Maud before I came here. She is better. Are you enjoying yourself?"

"The music is lovely ; and some of the women are lovelier. Mrs. Charteris is, I think, the prettiest creature I ever saw."

"She is very fast. And the very lowest form," says Kitty, strangely.

"Is she?" returns Gretchen, surprised. "But I don't think she looks like that, does she?"

"I know nothing about her ; I only tell you what all the world has told me," says Kitty, shortly. "Will you come

with me, Gretchen? I want to ask the duchess about this concert for the conversion of the Zulus."

They move away, and at the same moment Mrs. Charteris, rising, bows off Sir John, and, crossing the room, sinks into a low seat beside her cousin and bosom friend Lady Cyclamen Browne.

Lady Cyclamen is a widow also, and three years Fancy's senior. She is tall, and pale, and fragile.

"Well, what mischief have you been doing now?" asks Lady Cyclamen, with a smile, removing her skirts so as to make room for Mrs. Charteris beside her. "You always remind me of 'bonnie Lesley,' because 'the hearts o' men adore thee,' and you seem ever 'to spread your conquests farther.' I do believe you have had more proposals in this, the beginning of the season, than any one else can count in Mid-August."

"Well, they're all very nice to me, you know," says Fancy, with a little modest smile. "I suppose, like Marie Stuart, I may say I have been greatly loved. But I doubt I'm growing old, Cyclamen. My two last lovers are mere boys. Do you know them? Brandy Tremaine and Dandy Dinmont."

"I know all the Tremaines intimately," says Cyclamen. "And I know of your flirtations too. You will make bad blood between those two boys, won't you?"

"Oh, no, dear. Discipline is good for boys, and experience better."

"I wish you would cease your flirtation with Scrope. The duchess doesn't like it; and you know how unpleasant she can be. She has a terribly long tongue. And you have heard how anxious she is to marry him to Lady Adelaide Stowell. I wish you would give that up, if you don't intend to marry him."

"Marry Scrope! No, thank you! I should die of *ennui* in a week. He is quite too ugly, and quite too like his sister Jane, and almost as goody-goody. It will give me joy to refuse him when the moment comes, he fancies himself so intensely. And"—with a malicious little laugh—"I like vexing the dear duchess, too; she is so studiously uncivil to me, and so afraid of me. Look at her over there in that fearful gown. I always wish she would do something really wicked; she would be such a charming addition to Madame

Tussaud's rooms. Indeed, she might be there now, her complexion is so waxy."

"Who are those people just entering the room?" asks Cyclamen, glancing towards some new—some *very* new—arrivals.

"Where? Oh, there! My dear, how can you evince curiosity about such people?"

"Their hideousness has its attractions. That tall girl's hair is very distressing in warm weather. In January, perhaps, one might regard it with admiration."

"The hue is hot," says Mrs. Charteris. "They are from my part of the world, and came into some money of late years, which has had the most unhappy effect upon them."

"How so?"

"A very sad story, I assure you. The poor creatures quite lost their heads through it, and, what is worse, their memories."

"You are in one of your satirical moods."

"My dear child, no. Anything but that. I speak the simple truth, as you will believe when I tell you that the moment they found themselves tolerably well-to-do they completely forgot the people they had known all their lives. Now, is it not a mournful story? And I believe there is no cure for that sort of disease."

Lady Cyclamen laughs.

"Go on," she says: "that sort of being amuses me immensely."

"Does it? It annoys me more than I can say,—so much so, that when I found they meant to ignore their poorer neighbors, I ignored *them*."

"I admire your principles."

"Well, I hate breeding of that sort," says the dainty Fancy, with a little disdainful shrug of her pretty shoulders. "It reminds me"—with a faint sigh—"of Manchester—and—Mr. Charteris."

"Quite so, dear," says the friend, sympathetically.

"They were very, very civil to me, on account of the Honorable, you know, that goes before my name, and my money, and that. But I really couldn't see it. Their name was Townley."

"Was?"

"Yes. It is Townleigh now; though why they changed it no one can discover. There was some talk about a Lord

Townleigh ; but no one ever heard of him until they came in for their fortune."

"It reads longer on a card," suggests Cyclamen.

"Well, I dare say there is something in that. I confess I am surprised to see them here. I shouldn't have thought the duchess would have cared for them."

"I don't suppose she knows them. I dare say they begged the invitation through some one."

"Old Lady Tullamore took them in hand, I hear,—coached, tutored them, and all that, you know; even gives their balls for them; and excellent balls they are, they say,—unexceptionable form in every respect, and, in fact, all Tullamore and no Townleigh all through. One concludes, of course, the dear old lady does it for a consideration. One never knows about that sort of arrangement; but when Spendley's debts were paid last autumn every one asked every one else how it was done, and nobody could say."

"Perhaps it isn't true?" says Cyclamen.

"Oh, it is, of course. I think it a capital arrangement myself. Old madam gets money, and the Townleighs get guests (though, for the matter of that, half the people they entertain won't bow to them next day). Still, I dare say it pays them. And Spendley is quite a new man since, and our dear Lady Tullamore is none the worse. Altogether, it suits our times, don't you think?"

"It does," says Cyclamen, with grave emphasis.

"You disapprove?" says Fancy, quickly. "Well, you would, you know, and of course one wouldn't do it one's self; and dear old Tullamore wouldn't either, if she could help it. But 'money makes the man; the want of it the fellow.' Nevertheless she grins under it, and to hear her abuse the Townleighs is simply delicious."

"Very disgraceful, and very mean," says Cyclamen, with a curl of her short upper lip.

"It must be bad, though, to want money," says the more tolerant Fancy. "See that red-haired girl, how she gushes, how her body moves with every word she utters."

"She certainly does not possess the 'repose that marks the Vere de Vere,'" quotes Cyclamen, with a smile. "Ah! there is Kitty Blunden. How handsome she is! quite lovely when she smiles."

"Is she?"

"Isn't she?"

"I don't know, really. I have had no opportunity of judging. She never smiles on me."

"My good child, under the circumstances I don't see how you could expect it."

"I don't know what you mean. If you imagine I ever flirt with Sir John, you are immensely mistaken. We are quite too old friends for that."

"Oh!" says Cyclamen, unfurling her fan. "I had no idea there was a new name for it."

"Don't be absurd. I assure you the world might with pleasure hear every word I ever say to Sir John or he to me."

"Quite so. I am sure to hear it would afford the world exquisite pleasure."

"If you won't believe me,"—with a faint *moue*,—"I can't help it. It may *look* like it, but I certainly never flirt with him."

"Then permit me to say your manner is a very perfect imitation of it," says Cyclamen, with an irrepressible laugh.

"I doubt I'm getting a bad name, Cissy, when you go against me," says her companion, plaintively.

The crowd grows even thicker. The afternoon is quite a success, the singing excellent. The duchess has lost her temper only twice, and Lady Jane has distributed, carefully, six tracts and ten wounding remarks. The duke has made his escape, and is at this moment utterly happy, with his nose flattened against the club window, staring at the flags of Pall Mall.

Young Dinmont and Arthur Blunden—the latter of whom has dropped in for five minutes—are threading their way through the rooms in the lazy, indolent fashion common to those who have little or nothing to do in this work-a-day world. After twenty minutes' pleasant toil, they find themselves snugly, if closely, stowed away in a window-recess behind an ottoman, on which, just before them, two women are sitting, apparently lost in a serious *tête-à-tête*.

Only their backs can be seen by Blunden and his companion, but it occurs to Arthur that the hair belonging to the smaller of the two is very good to look at. It is soft and lovely and

bright gold, with here and there a touch of brown. She is dressed in some marvellous costume, and on the small shapely head a perfect *bijou* of a bonnet, all white feathers, rests lightly. He is beginning to wonder vaguely what face is beneath this bonnet, when Dandy breaks silence.

"Crowded, isn't it?" he says, with all the air of one who has made an original remark. Mr. Dinmont is looking his best to-day, and has got himself up regardless of expense. His face is bright with expectation and *bonhomie*, his step is elastic, his garments are something "more exquisite still,"—they are so quiet, so unassuming, yet so replete with taste of the most correct.

Mr. Dinmont flatters himself that, young as he is, he can give lessons to "bigger fellows" in the art of dressing, and never regards his trim young figure in a passing mirror without a throb of honest pride.

There are no wrinkles about Mr. Dinmont, no creases, no "knees." From the crown of his sleek closely-cropped head to the soles of his boots (that induce the envious beholder to believe they must have grown to his feet, so well-fitting are they) he is quite perfection. His manners are most engaging, and to-day in particular he is affable in the extreme.

"Very," returns Blunden, slowly, wishing the owner of the two little shell-pink ears before him would turn round. "Now tell me who is everybody, will you, as I feel rather out in the cold, having been away from England for so long."

"You mean to tell me you know nobody?"

"Far from it. Such blissful ignorance is not for me: I know most. But I suppose some young stars have presented themselves during my absence, and it is well to know who is to be admired and who isn't. Not that I see much beauty going," says Arthur, sadly, adjusting his glass in his left eye and treating the room to a liberal stare; "very meagre assortment indeed. Makes one sigh for Old England. I hardly notice anybody fit to look at except Kitty Blunden, and she is exquisite. So bred, you know, and that."

"Oh, all that," says Dandy: "she is the acknowledged belle of the season."

"Of course, without telling. Such color, such finish. She rather puts the others in the shade."

"Not every one,"—warmly. "She is the handsomest

woman in London, we all know, but there is still some beauty left. There is Mrs. Charteris, for instance." (The low-toned dialogue on the ottoman dies abruptly.) "I haven't seen her here to-day,"—in an aggrieved tone,—“but I wish you could see *her*. I want to introduce you to her. She is awfully pretty and awfully charming.”

“And awfully fast, as I'm told,”—with an ill-disguised yawn. “Yes, I know all about it: have seen lots of 'em in my time. And——Thanks, old man, but I think I'll defer the introduction until some other day. One gets tired of it, you know, and—er—I can't endure that sort of person myself.”

Here the white bonnet turns slowly, very slowly, until a charming, childish, *débonnaire* face makes itself known to the speakers behind. Two large blue eyes look first at Dintmont and then fasten themselves upon Arthur Blunden with a deliberate stare. It is as though they sought to impress his features indelibly upon the memory of their owner.

Blunden returns the glance willingly, and thinks he has never seen such expressive eyes before, or any so hostile.

Then the face is again withdrawn, and the happy possessor of that unapproachable bonnet says something in a subdued voice to her companion, who is evidently shaking with suppressed laughter.

“Who is she?” asks Blunden, hurriedly, of the petrified Dandy.

“*Mrs. Charteris*,” replies that youth, in an agonized whisper; whereupon Blunden gives way to a naughty expression, and, turning, flies.

“It is my turn next,” says Mrs. Charteris, in a curious tone, gazing after him, with a sudden flash in her laughing eyes quite foreign to them.

“Why, Fancy, I do believe you are angry,” says her cousin, in an amused tone, leaning forward, so as to examine her face more minutely. “I thought you always said you were above the world's opinion. My dear girl, ‘what a falling off is here!’ Why, even I—whom you despise as a person utterly devoid of pluck—should only laugh at such nonsense.”

“Should you?”—in an impossible tone. “I confess I don't feel in the least like laughing. His manner was insolent,—detestable,—not to be borne. But I shall wait,”—tapping her fan against her hand ominously,—“I shall lay

my plans, and when I can cry checkmate to him then I shall laugh."

"My dear, you terrify me. Poor, poor Mr. Blunden! I wouldn't be he for anything. Your tone is positively tragic."

CHAPTER XVIII.

"Teach not thy lip such scorn, for it was made
For kissing, lady, not for such contempt."

Richard III.

It is half an hour later. A few people who have been born with a desire to do something, and who are always religiously trying to do it, have taken their departure, and have sought the happy working-grounds of their imaginations. The others still linger on, idly indulging in gossip, slightly impure and anything but simple.

The musicians hold on bravely. Just now a very young lady is enchanting the audience and is filling the room with her plaintive fresh young voice. She is a mediæval young lady, and is clad in a gown that clings to her and trails and almost weeps behind her, so sad it is, and so unhealthy its indescribable shade of green. As one of Mr. Whistler's dismal arrangements, or symphonies, or harmonies, even he himself might well be proud of her.

She has plainly a hankering after high art. Her sleeves, tight almost to impossibility, are puffed largely at the shoulders; round her neck some silver chains are drawn, as though with a desire to strangle; and I am sure she would have been happy forever could she but have dared to appear before the British public in one of those tall peaked caps from which a veil descended, and which formed a prominent feature in the Dark Ages.

She is very earnest and almost pretty, and Gretchen at a distance is delighted with her large solemn eyes and thin pale little face. She is singing with all her might, though in the choice of music circumstances have been somewhat against her. No doubt she would have liked to chant the loves and

woes of a Lord Rowland or a Sir Hildebrand ; yet here she is entreating a frivolous people—with wide eyes and a very general sleeplessness—not to wake her, as she wants to “dream again”!

Kitty is pleased with her, too, but just a little supercilious ; and every woman in the room is asking every other woman where on earth she got that awful gown,—except, perhaps, Mrs. Charteris, who, in another room, is oblivious to all but the honeyed words of “a very foolish fond *young man*” who is leaning over her chair.

The young man is Brandy Tremaine, and he is evidently very far gone indeed. His whilom friend, his Damon,—*alias* Dandy Dinmont,—watching him from a distant doorway, is devoured with jealousy, and, noting Mrs. Charteris's mild acceptance of his homage, asks himself bitterly how he could ever have felt a friendship for Tremaine.

Fancy, in a ravishing costume of pearl-gray and *the* white bonnet, is waving languidly from side to side a monstrous fan in her tiny pearl-gray hand, and has a charmingly absent air about her. A fan in her possession is a weapon : she generally does great execution with it. Now, one might almost believe she is not listening to one word said by the devoted Brandy, who is talking to her in an *empressé* undertone. Yet she hears, and answers every one of his remarks without a fault.

As a rule there is always a young man leaning over Mrs. Charteris's chair, talking to her in an *empressé* undertone ; and not always the same young man, either : she knows better than that ! She adores boys, and evidently finds in them a fund of amusement. Whether the boys find the same amount of enjoyment in the game, who shall say ? It is needless to state, however, that they adore her, one and all.

“I am of the greatest possible use to them,” she is wont to say, airily. “How they would get on without me I can't imagine. Their mothers owe me a debt of gratitude, which they never pay, though I think they ought to present me with a handsome testimonial every season. Those boys come to me rough and unshaped, and by the time they have tired of their little infatuation for me, or—or I have tired of them—it is *quite* the same thing—they are presentable young men, fit to go anywhere. I don't myself think them half as amus-

ing then. But, you see, I am peculiar. I like them best just at first, they are so earnest and so deliciously naïve. I must say I think it is very kind of me all the trouble I take about them. If only for this consideration alone, Mrs. Grundy ought to pardon me all my crimes and misdemeanors so called."

Arthur Blunden since his defeat has been somewhat gloomy and taciturn. Sir John, seeing him leaning against a doorway and looking decidedly bored, comes over to him and slips his arm through his.

"You'll evaporate if you keep on looking so cloudy," he says. "Come with me, and I'll introduce you to one of the prettiest women in town,—amusing, too, and that's everything in this dull age. She'll suit you tremendously."

"You excite my curiosity," says Arthur, in a dreary tone that belies his word. "Where is your *rara avis*? I should like to see her."

He accompanies Sir John in an indolent, listless fashion across the room, until brought to a full stop before a low seat, when, looking up, he finds himself face to face with Mrs. Charteris.

It is too late to recede: so he pulls himself together and tries to look like somebody else, and fails ignominiously. He feels the tell-tale color mounting to his brow, and is presently comfortably aware he must resemble nothing so strongly as a full-blown peony. Mrs. Charteris, on the contrary, is delightfully unembarrassed, and perfectly free from *mauvaise honte* of any description.

The introduction is gone through, and Mrs. Charteris absolutely smiles and beams upon her new acquaintance. But the new acquaintance tells himself, with a shudder, there is malice in the smile and meditated revenge in the beam, and secretly arms himself for war.

Presently Sir John, moving away, takes Brandy with him, leaving Arthur and Mrs. Charteris alone. When "Greek meets Greek, then comes the tug of war." At this moment Blunden for the second time is conscious of a cold chill that permeates his entire body.

"You have only just returned to England, I think?" begins Fancy, politely.

"Yes; I have been some time abroad,—idling in the East, mostly. Coming home I spent a few days at Cyprus."

"Ah! then you can tell me all about it," says Mrs. Charteris, with suspicious geniality. "Is it a very charming place, or quite the reverse? There is no believing the newspaper reports. What principally strikes one on first landing?"

"Soldiers, and fever, and dirt," returns he, gloomily, feeling distrustful of the brilliant reception accorded him.

"How disappointing! I really couldn't discuss soldiers, and fever, and—and all the rest of it: so let us change the conversation. That is Lady Fanny Falkiner over there. Do you admire her?"

"She is pretty, but a degree too dark for my taste."

("Mean and palpable flattery! It sha'n't save him," says Mrs. Charteris to her own heart.)

"Yes? she would not suit you in other ways either, perhaps. You are a stranger in London just now, so you must let me tell you some of the home gossip. I like Lady Fanny myself intensely,—quite altogether, you know. But they do say odd things of her. They call her fast, and you, I fancy (though why I scarcely know), would not admire 'that sort of person.'"

Blunden draws his moustache slowly through his fingers and his breath somewhat hardly. Beauty insulted is no joke; and he tells himself, with an inward groan, that now indeed he is in for it!

"It would entirely depend upon circumstances," he replies, calmly,—if without knowing in the very least what he means,—and with such an amount of successful indifference as should have raised feelings of admiration in her breast.

"What a politic answer!" she says, with a short but amused smile. "I like politic people myself, they are so safe, so unlikely to form conclusions in a hurry or without sufficient knowledge. I dare say I shall like you immensely after a bit."

("Little hypocrite!" says Blunden, under his breath.)

"But to return to Lady Fanny," goes on Mrs. Charteris: "she has her enemies. But that is hardly to be wondered at in this mischievous world. Do you know"—with an aggrieved glance—"I have mine!"

"You can't expect me to believe that," says Blunden, feebly.

"I have, indeed,"—shaking her blonde head sorrowfully.

"You know what Hamlet says: 'Be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny.' I have not only enemies among my friends, but—would you credit it?—I have actually heard people who have never exchanged one word with me, condemn me heartily behind my back! Yes,"—maliciously,—"*literally* behind my back! Is not that shameful? You see, it gives one no chance of defending one's self. I think it a little mean: don't you?"

Blunden is silent. His eyes are on the ground. His face is rather red. He is still aimlessly and unconsciously caressing his moustache.

"No wonder you are silent," goes on Mrs. Charteris, mercilessly, always with the plaintive ring in her voice: "one finds a difficulty in understanding it. *You* would not condemn any one on hearsay, would you?"

Blunden gives in. The strain is too great. He succumbs, and lifts his head and meets her eyes. His own are full of mute pleading.

"Mrs. Charteris," he says, in a low tone, with every appearance of the deepest, the most flattering contrition, "have mercy on me."

Mrs. Charteris smiles. It is altogether a different smile from her former one. It is (as Blunden even at this critical moment assures himself) one of the prettiest smiles he ever saw.

"I am the most merciful woman in the world," she says, and moves her skirts a little to one side and motions him to seat himself near her. Arthur, with a very grateful glance, falls into line directly.

"How like your cousin, Sir John, you are!" she says, presently, in her sweetest tones, turning to examine his features with gentle but gratifying interest. Blunden's *ennui* has all disappeared. He begins to think musical afternoons capital things, and Mrs. Charteris the most calumniated of her sex. Poor man! He little knows that all these blandishments and tender smiles are but first steps to the revenge she has promised herself.

"We are thought like," he replies, presently, "almost as like as brothers,—more so than ordinary cousins, don't you think?"

"Oh, yes. Now, Cyclamen and I,—do you know Cyclo-

men—Lady Cyclamen Browne?—we are cousins, but nothing can be so dissimilar.”

“Cyclamen! What a curious name!”

“Yes, is it not? Her mother, you see, was mad. No, by the by, it wasn't that,”—putting two fingers to her brow with a pretty affectation of forgetfulness,—“I am sure not that; but she was romantic, poor soul; and, after all,”—airily,—“it is just the same thing. She christened her first daughter Cyclamen, and the second Pansy. It was hard on the poor little things, wasn't it? and they didn't like it, either. The Pansy died while yet in the bud, and you may see how pale and fragile Cyclamen has grown up: quite like her little garden namesake, I always say. But she is a perfect pet, and I adore her.”

“You must point her out to me. Irrespective of being your cousin, I should like to see the person you adore.”

“You shall be gratified later on. There are the Carringtons: why, Phyllis looks positively younger, in spite of the wonderful baby. You have seen nearly everybody to-day, I think.”

“It is quite a ‘dream of fair women,’” says Blunden, gallantly.

“‘Brave women and fair men,’ I call them nowadays,” says Fancy, disdainfully. “The women are so strong-minded, the men so very much the reverse. I don't think I quite like our Saxon-haired men either,”—with an appreciative glance at Blunden's brown sleek head,—“or men that always stay at home; it makes them so stupid, so wanting in many ways. Don't you think, Mr. Blunden, that travelling improves the mind?”

This is said so naïvely—with such pretended want of meaning—that Blunden laughs aloud. And then she laughs too; and altogether they both appear so amused and so pleased with each other's society that Dandy Dinmont, who in the distance is watching them, is consumed with envy and jealousy. Brandy, standing a little way from him, with his eyes concentrated upon the same beloved but tormenting object, is also miserable; though, perhaps, not quite so miserable as he himself fondly believes.

A month ago, if any trouble had visited either of them they would have rushed into each other's presence and poured

out without reservation the grievance, whatever it might be, sure of receiving in return for their confidence instant generous sympathy. But now the old friendship is forgotten. They stand aloof, and barely recognize each other when they meet. Not that they are openly uncivil when untoward circumstances fling them in the same path: on the contrary, they are scrupulously—nay, painfully—polite, and would not for worlds say or do anything not in keeping with the strictest rules of etiquette. But each regards the other with suspicion as a probable supplanter in the good graces of Mrs. Charteris.

"I suppose Blunden is the latest victim?" says Dandy, bitterly, addressing—of all people—Kitty, who happens to be near him.

"I hardly think so. Arthur is so different from other men, so self-contained, and so discerning," replies Kitty, unsmilingly. "There are in *his* eyes qualities superior to mere beauty."

"But her beauty is not her only charm: she is full of 'em," says Mr. Dinmont, dismally, yet unable to resist throwing a lance in defence of his cruel divinity. "You think her beautiful?"

"Very pretty indeed,"—calmly. A wise woman never abuses another woman to a man, whatever she may do when *tête-à-tête* with her own sex. Kitty is a wise woman.

"She evidently fancies Arthur: she would, you know. He is so like Sir John," goes on this unhappy young man, almost *sotto voce*, utterly unconscious of the fact that he is discharging a private bombshell that may burst at any moment.

"What has that to do with her infatuation?" asks she, forcing a pale smile.

"Oh, nothing,—nothing to signify. Sir John was rather *épris* with her before her marriage. But of course that is all over. A fellow must be spooney on some one, you know, until he gets a wife himself."

"And was she too—— Did she like Sir John?"

"Don't know, I'm sure,"—gloomily. "I don't suppose she could like any one honestly: I don't believe she has a heart at all," says Mr. Dinmont, with increasing bitterness.

"So much the better for her," returns Kitty, strangely.

And then Launceston comes up to her, and she smiles upon him with sudden and unusual kindness, and allows him to escort her to her carriage.

* * * * *

After dinner, when she and her husband are alone, she says, gently,—

"How many people one meets and visits without actually knowing anything about them! Who is Mrs. Charteris, Jack?"

"One of the Lisles of Surrey, and the second prettiest woman in town," replies Jack, concisely.

"And who is the first?"

"You are,"—promptly.

"Nonsense!"—with a smile. "How absurd you are!—You have known her a long time, Jack?" He is not looking at his wife at the moment, or he might have noticed something peculiar about the expression of her eyes.

"Fancy Charteris? Yes. Some time."

To Kitty's excited imagination there seems a reservation in his way of answering.

"I don't think I quite like her," she says, quietly. "From all I hear she seems rather—rather——"

"Does she?" says Jack. "Can't say, I'm sure."

"I mean, rather indifferent to the world's opinion,"—choosing her words carefully.

"Fast, you would say? Don't believe half you hear, Kitty; it is all spite and envy on the part of the other women. She is pretty, you know, and clever, and very much admired,—three unpardonable crimes. She rather cuts the rest of them out, that's the fact. You are too pretty yourself, darling, to be illiberal on that score."

"She was a great friend of yours once, Jack, wasn't she?"—very earnestly.

"She is a great friend of mine still, I hope," replies he, carelessly.

"But not so great as she was then,—before her marriage?" pursues Kitty, a feeling of suffocation at her foolish heart.

"How can I answer that?" says Sir John, who is the kindest-hearted and the most unobservant of men. "Nothing lasts, you know,—not even friendship,—not even love, they say."

"Doesn't it?" says Kitty, wistfully. "That seems sad. I can't believe that."

"Oh, I dare say it's all talk, you know,—poetry and rubbish," returns he, absently. He has an evening paper in his hand, and is engrossed with its contents. "Look here, Kitty: listen to this affair in Brighton. By Jove, I knew Warburton would get himself into a scrape if he didn't look out, and now——"

"Wait one moment: I shall be back directly," says Kitty, somewhat huskily, escaping from the room. His avoidance of the subject of Mrs. Charteris (as it seems to her) compels her to put credence in the foolish words dropped by Dandy in the afternoon. His praise of the woman she almost calls her rival is bitter to her; his refusal to give her his confidence (as she believes) is more bitter still.

CHAPTER XIX.

"Thou art a queen, fair Lesley,
Thy subjects we before thee;
Thou art divine, fair Lesley;
The hearts o' men adore thee."

R. BURNS,

THE concert for the conversion of the Zulus comes off to-night, and promises to be fashionably attended. It is such a delightful thing to know that, by spending a sovereign or two and listening to the best music the season can afford, one is behaving in a highly religious and moral manner. Every one tries to think his or her money is to be the chief means of changing the untamable barbarian to the mildness of the cooing dove. It is, perhaps, a pity the interesting blacks cannot themselves hear the solos and trios and faultless glees arranged in their honor, as "music hath charms to soothe the savage breast;" and if a tall hat has had the effect of reducing Cetewayo to a sense of decency, what wonders might not be worked by one of our popular melodies!

The Duchess of Shropshire, who loves to succor impossible charities, heads the list of patronesses. Lady Tullamore, dear old thing, has been induced to give her drawing-rooms (because it is to be strictly select, and the preparatory expenses are to cost as little as possible) for the occasion, in consideration for which she receives a ticket free and invitations for all the Townleighs.

The most admired artists have been engaged; and the audience, though small, is singularly *chic*. The duchess—though of course none of the seats are actually reserved—has given it to be understood she and Lady Jane will expect two seats to be kept for them in the front row, as being principal promoters of this admirable scheme. And, her grace's powers of invective being fully acknowledged, no one cares to usurp these seats, until Mrs. Charteris, entering in good time, sees them, and, guessing the situation at a glance, determines mischievously to possess herself of one, and for once foil the duchess.

Scrope, the eldest son of the house of Shropshire, whose manner has been even unusually *empresé* during the past week,—so much so as almost to drive his mother to the verge of despair,—instantly joins her, and, unconscious of coming storms, takes possession of the second seat. Some one who has the management of affairs attempts a faint argument with Mrs. Charteris on the subject; but she is quite equal to this or any occasion, and few people keep up a discussion with the wilful beauty. Unfurling her fan, she gazes languidly around, and awaits with undiminished calm the enemy's approach.

"The foe,—they come, they come." The duchess, followed by Lady Jane, sweeps slowly up the room, but, seeing one of the coveted seats occupied by her *bête noire*, comes to a full stop just before her, and looks inquiringly, nay, expectantly, at the chair. But for dignity's sake, Fancy could have laughed aloud. She merely shuts her fan, however, with a little snap, and turns her own lovely innocent eyes sweetly up to the old lady.

"This is my seat, I think," says the duchess, in an awful tone, disdaining to notice her son, who shows signs of unmistakable fear.

"I think not," replies Fancy, politely. "I believe there are no reserved seats here to-night."

"I desired two seats should be kept for me and my daughter. These are they. I specially marked them out. You have usurped them, I think."

The ancient dame, as is her wont, is growing rude and overbearing.

"You forget to whom you are speaking," says Fancy, mildly, who is beginning to enjoy herself tremendously.

"Forget! No. I wish I could. Your conduct is at all times such as it offends me to witness. But for your poor dead mother's sake, madam, I would know nothing of you."

"Your memory is failing," says Mrs. Charteris, gravely, not to say reprovingly. "A moment since you forgot me; now (how much worse!), you are forgetting yourself."

"You are insolent," murmurs the duchess, intemperately, preparing to march off with her "ugly duckling."

"And very comfortable," replies Fancy, softly, stirring with cosy languor in the disputed chair. She shrugs her shoulders and smiles a little; and the old lady, enraged and thoroughly discomfited, retires. Fancy, turning her head, looks with curiosity and some faint interest at the terrified Scrope.

"Has your mother frightened you?" she asks, contemptuously. "If so, go and appease her wrath, and tell Mr. Tremaine or Mr. Dinmont I should like to see one of them. Don't send both at once. They always amuse me. Say there is a vacant seat near me. Yes, there is a vacant seat, because I desire you to go. I hate people who are afraid of people." And the spoiled beauty, leaning back, with a slight wave of her fan dismisses him.

Scrope, not daring to disobey, quits the desired seat, and even so far carries out her instructions as to send Brandy Tremaine to fill his place. Mrs. Charteris welcomes him with a maddening smile as sweet as "golden Hippocrene."

"You sing?" she asks, presently, during a pause in the entertainment.

"Oh, no, never," says Brandy.

"What, never?"

"Well, hardly ever," says Mr. Tremaine, making his little quotation with a seraphic smile. He is quite happy, blissfully content. Mrs. Charteris has singled him out to be the hero of the hour, and his dearest friend Dandy is scowl-

ing at his good fortune from an opposite wall. What is left to be desired?

"I'm awfully fond of music, don't you know," says Brandy; "always know the right moment to applaud, and that, and on rare occasions have been known to break forth in song. But I can't say my efforts were ever received with enthusiasm; and, indeed, to tell you the truth," confesses Mr. Tremaine frankly, "I don't think my best friend could mistake me for a second Mario."

"I quite understand,"—kindly. "For my own part, I much prefer a moderate voice to a loud one, if it be sweet." She accompanies this speech with a charming smile, that plainly expresses her belief in Mr. Tremaine's voice being of the "dainty sweet"—if insignificant—order. Then she goes on: "I know your friend Mr. Dinmont can sing, because I have been told so."

"Have you?" says Brandy, ominously mild. "That is, of course, an all-sufficient reason. People tell the truth. don't they? He may; though I can't say I've ever heard him."

"No? Not heard him? And he your *fidus Achates*. Why, how is that?"

"Oh,"—maliciously,—"I've seen him stand up beside a piano, and I've seen a girl play his accompaniment, and I've seen him turn the leaves of the music before him, and I've seen his lips move, but I've certainly never heard him. His is indeed a 'still small voice.' It might"—with a grimace—"please you. You say you like moderate voices."

"I am surprised. Some one told me only yesterday he was very musical."

"I dare say. Gretchen says he sings. You know my sister, Mrs. Dugdale?"

"Yes. I think her the very charmingest woman I ever met."

"Well, do you know, Gretchen is nice," says Brandy, thus gracefully, if with all the reluctance of a near relation, admitting his sister's good points. "She likes Dinmont. She"—unpleasantly—"likes every one."

"I really think it was Mr. Dugdale told me of your friend's good tenor voice." She lays careful stress upon the word "friend."

Brandy laughs; but his merriment is slightly sardonic.

"You make me remember a line from Gray," he says. "I never hear Dinmont's voice spoken of without thinking of it:

'Along the cool sequestered vale of life
He keeps the noiseless tenor of his way.'

"What a wickedly severe little speech! You make me quite afraid of you," says Mrs. Charteris, reprovingly; but she lets her eyes meet his as she says it, and laughs a low, amused laugh, that contains not a shadow of disapproval. "Was it not King James or King Somebody who said, 'Save me from my friends'? I hope you deal fairly by me, Mr. Tremaine, when I am out of your sight."

"That is so seldom," murmurs Mr. Tremaine. "From the time I rise until I have to go to bed, I do nothing but haunt the spots that may be fortunate enough to hold you."

"You shouldn't say things you don't mean," says Mrs. Charteris, with reproachful gravity that makes the foolish boy's heart beat loudly. "And I don't quite like to hear you sneer at Mr. Dinmont. He is very agreeable, is he not? And he really dresses *à merveille*."

"He overdoes it," growls Brandy: "too much of a good thing, you know. I can't stand a fellow who uses scent. He reminds me of Horace's fellow, that 'slender youth bedewed with liquid odors.' Makes me ill,"—with scornful disgust.

Presently—not so much tiring of Brandy as feeling sorry for Dandy, who is gazing at her from the "near distance" in a most dispiriting fashion—she gets rid of Tremaine, and by a judiciously directed glance draws his friend into the seat beside her. Seeing him rather inclined towards the reproachful mood, she quickly grasps the rôle herself, and says, plaintively,—

"I thought you meant to cut me to-night."

"Oh, Mrs. Charteris, you couldn't have thought that."

"I did indeed. What else could I think? You saw me bored to death by Lord Scrope, and never came to my assistance."

"I fancied you liked him. Some women like marquises, no matter how ugly or prosy they may be. And then afterwards"—miserably—"you looked so happy with Tremaine."

"Did I?—Not happy, surely. It isn't every one"—with a swift glance from under the long lashes—"can make me happy. Contented perhaps; but nothing more. I like Mr. Tremaine; and of course he was a relief after Lord Scrope, who never will speak of anything but the land question and Lord Chelmsford; and what can be more stupid than both? But—but I felt your indifference very much."

"I wish I was indifferent!" says poor Dandy, with a sigh that almost amounts to a groan. "You can do what you like with me, and you know it, and it makes me rather wretched at times. I dare say Tremaine is a more amusing fellow than I am, and better-looking. I'm not such a fool that I can't see that."

"Is he?"—in a very low whisper. On the whole, I think Dinmont is better fun to Mrs. Charteris than Brandy Tremaine. With one tiny finger she traces, as though embarrassed, the dainty pattern on her fan; runs lightly over the painted Cupids and Loves and Graces that adorn it, and whose principal clothing is the paint. "I don't." Then, as though fearful she has said too much,—arch-coquette that she is,—she goes on quickly, with a sudden and complete change of tone:

"Though you must know that Mr. Tremaine is a great friend of mine,—a very great friend. I am positively fond of Brandy Tremaine."

"I wish you wouldn't say that," says Dinmont.

"But I am, indeed. And I am sure"—innocently—"he is fond of me. What a dear little fair curly head he has!"—glancing somewhat mischievously at the sleek dark hair beside her. "He is quite a 'curled darling:' isn't he?"

"Don't know, I'm sure," replies Dandy, gruffly.

About this time it occurs to Fancy's active mind that one of her attendant slaves has not as yet put in an appearance,—that is, has not come to offer incense at her shrine. Giving Dandy time to recover from his fit of spleen, she glances lazily round the room.

Lady Blunden, in a charming gown and a cap of lace so old as to make one wonder how it holds together, is looking lovely, and is the admired of all admirers. Beside her, conversing cleverly and with an evident desire to please, is a man of about thirty-eight. Cecil Launceston, though by no

means the handsomest man in town, is certainly one of the most distinguished, and, in spite of his lack of title and his having no money to speak of, is the fashion.

By a word he can make or mar a coming beauty and ruin or save a tailor. His opinion with a certain set is law, his decision final. By ugly women he is detested, by pretty ones adored.

His little affair with Fancy Charteris—now a year old—is a thing of the past; and, neither having suffered in the encounter, they are now fast friends. "Very fast friends!" said Lady Jane, one day, with a bitter intonation. At present he worships at Lady Blunden's feet,—deferentially, but as devoutly as Lady Blunden (who is somewhat intolerant of worshippers) will allow.

Farther on as Fancy's eyes travel they discover Arthur Blunden, and, having found him,—as though search is at an end,—roam no more.

He is sitting beside Lady Cyclamen Browne, talking to her. If Cyclamen is not the rose, she is, as a rule, always very near the rose; and this thought—though as yet he is hardly aware of it—endears her to him. Of late he has fallen into the habit of following Mrs. Charteris from scene to scene, dancing attendance upon her generally, acting as her servitor carefully, though unobtrusively, and indeed finding his chiefest joy in her society. To Cyclamen he can talk of her, which is a great comfort: indeed, neither Brandy nor Dandy is more idiotically in love with Mrs. Charteris than is Mr. Blunden himself.

Just now he has asked some question about the defunct Charteris, and Lady Cyclamen is answering him.

"He was quite a shocking person,—very oppressive, and that," says Cyclamen, fluently. "Used to call himself 'self-made;' though what on earth he could have meant by that I can't imagine. Said he came to London—like Dick Whittington—as a boy with fourpence-halfpenny in his pocket. Why will they always make it fourpence-halfpenny?" says Cyclamen, sadly. "Why not fivepence or sixpence? There is at least a ring of silver about that. But fourpence-halfpenny,—it is a very base coin. And then the halfpenny: what could he do with that?"

"Buy himself a bun, perhaps,"—absently.

"I can't be positive, but I'm almost sure a bun costs a penny."

"True. And that makes matters worse," says Arthur, entering into the spirit of the discussion; "because if he walked from the end of the world, or wherever he came from, he must have been hungry, and of course bought a bun, which reduces his income to three-pence-halfpenny."

"My dear Mr. Blunden, it is plain you knew very little of the late Mr. Charteris, or you would understand how short a way four buns would go with him."

"Then I suppose the baker got the pennies."

"And now we may safely conclude he began life with a halfpenny."

"Even that is more respectable, because more uncommon," says Blunden, mildly.

"I wonder"—pensively—"what he did with that halfpenny?"

"I think we may as well let him keep that much," says Arthur, good-naturedly. "Surely you would not have him begin life without a halfpenny? Altogether, he must have had rather a bad time until—until he met his wife. I knew him, you know, very slightly, certainly; but he didn't strike me as quite so unpleasant a fellow as you describe."

"You must have known him very slightly. He was a miserable creature, and I know behaved very badly to dear Fancy. They said"—sinking her voice to a whisper—"that he actually beat her!"

"Oh, impossible!" exclaims Blunden, with sudden energy, so unlike his indolent indifference of a moment before as to make his companion regard him curiously.

("So," thinks she, half amused, as she studies his disturbed features, and marks how his eyes are fixed on Fancy, who in the distance is chattering and laughing gayly with Dandy, and is looking as *débonnaire* and free from care as though the deceased Charteris had never been, "it has come to this, has it? Fancy's revenge is almost within her grasp. How will it end, I wonder?"

"Not that I altogether believe that story," she goes on, presently. "Fancy doesn't strike one as being a woman likely to bear insult of that kind calmly. • But, at all events, he was very impossible. Now, poor Mr. Browne—though

not everything, perhaps, he ought to have been—was never brutal. And I remember how glad we all were, for her sake, when Mr. Charteris died. She, of course, had the grace not to say it; but I know she was glad too."

"I should think she was. How could she ever have married him?"

"Her people talked her into it. He was enormously rich, you know; and money counts," says Lady Cyclamen, sententiously.

"So does happiness,"—severely.

"The two things go together, I fancy. It isn't poetical, and it isn't pretty, but isn't it true? Money will not be despised—Ah, Laura, is it you, dear? Had no idea you were coming."

"Take my seat, Mrs. Redesdale," says Blunden to the new-comer, and, rising, he makes his way towards Fancy, and, the concert being nearly over, and some seats empty, manages to get into one just beside her.

"I have been watching you," she says, with an adorable pout. "You didn't suspect that, did you? What were you saying to Cyclamen all that long, long time,—quite an hour, I should say? Was she very fascinating?"

"She is one of the most charming people in the world, and you——"

"Yes——"

"Are more charming still."

"Thanks so much. What a laborious compliment! Cyclamen is looking very well to-night. Do you think her pretty?"

"Not very."

"Don't think me rude if I say I hardly believe that. And don't offend me by pretending to think me jealous. I haven't a particle of jealousy in my composition." (To do her justice, she has not.) "Why should one want to be the only pretty woman in the world?"

"Well, then, I do think her pretty. Does that appease your majesty?"

"I myself think Mrs. Dugdale prettier. Her expression has something in it that is lovely. Gretchen is like an angel when she smiles, and Cyclamen is like a dove. I like her pallor and that little wistful look she has in her eyes. One

can hardly wonder at her having it, poor darling; her husband led her such a life! He was old, you know,—old as the eternal hills,—and ‘crabbed age and youth cannot live together.’”

Blunden with difficulty suppresses a smile. He is evidently in for confidences to-night.

“He was a very disagreeable man, and the worst possible form, and that,” goes on Fancy, placidly. “Mr. Charteris, of course, I admit wasn’t much, but at least he never professed to be more than a plain man. But Mr. Browne would insist on being what he never could be by any possibility, and that is, a gentleman. He went to Cambridge, certainly, and got pushed into society somehow, and he had any amount of money; but then we couldn’t forget his father was a leather merchant. He gave himself airs, you know, and was quite too dreadful.”

“There’s nothing like leather,” puts in Mr. Blunden, somewhat frivolously.

“Yes, there is. Mr. Browne was the image of it, he was so tough, and obstinate, and odious. He would put the e to his name, though it never did him the least good, he looked so like the other thing. He wouldn’t give poor Cyclamen enough money to dress herself decently. Just imagine that! Could anything be worse? We were all quite charmed when he died, for her sake, poor dear!”

Mr. Blunden disgraces himself by laughing out loud. Surely, he tells himself, it is a little like a French comedy.

“What are you laughing at?” asks Fancy, smiling too, always ready to sympathize with a “happy thought.” But Mr. Blunden evades the question and goes on to another subject.

“I saw you bundle off Scrope rather unceremoniously,” he says. “How did he incur your displeasure? or has he incurred it? I hope so.”

“No, I did not quarrel with him, but his mother quarrelled with me, and her temper so frightened him that he lost all the little sense of humor he possesses: so, as I hate stupid people, I sent him away. I sent her away, too, a sadder but a wiser woman. I have half a mind to dismiss you now, you were so long in coming.”

“Do not consign me to an early grave,” implores he, pro-

foundly serious. "If you dismiss me in such a cold-blooded manner I shall refuse to live."

"Then stay," says Mrs. Charteris, softly, a touch of tenderness in her tone.

CHAPTER XX.

"And when he walked down into the saloon
He sate him pensive o'er a dish of tea."

Don Juan.

DUGDALE has been persuaded to see the new doctor, has even unburdened his soul to him, and shown his passionate desire for life,—life that is full of power and strength, not life as it now is with him,—a bare existence hardly worth the keeping.

This Doctor Blunt is a great, gaunt, restless man of about thirty-two, with curious eager eyes, black as night and piercing, and hair raven in hue, and (in unpleasant contrast) a skin white to pallor.

Gretchen (she hardly knows why) barely tolerates him. In her eyes he is repulsive to such a degree as to be almost attractive,—on the principle that extremes meet. A horror of him, yet a strange trust in him, fight for mastery. For the first time in all her life, poor child, she practises deception, and, conquering her repugnance, plays off upon him all the gentle arts of pleasing so natural to her, in fond hope that, if kindly dealt with, he may more faithfully strive to cure.

And perhaps her tender duplicity does gain with him; or perhaps, gazing at the extreme beauty of his patient's face and frame, an honest desire to baffle fate and restore him to health and vigor grows strong within him. However it may be, he throws his whole heart into his task, and, almost to the neglect of other duties, aims at success in this one case.

* * * * *

To-day Lady Cyclamen Browne is "at home." In her drawing-room she sits, robed in unexceptionable array, awaiting her guests. At her feet, nursing a wondrous doll,—all eyes

and impossible coiffure,—reclines her special treasure, her little daughter Olive.

It is still early,—so early that no one with any sense of grace can come for fully an hour; and Olive (strange fact) has been quiet for almost a minute! At last she breaks this unusual silence.

"Mamma, I should like to be the queen," says she, her eyes—dark and liquid as her mother's—earnest and full of thought.

"Yes? And why, darling? Well, I dare say; I don't fancy I should despise the position myself. What thought possesses you now, Olive?"

"For one thing, she is quite safe to go to heaven," replies the child, her beautiful face upraised and very intense.

Cyclamen laughs.

"Is she? What a loyal child you are! I'm sure I hope she may; but one can't be quite sure of anything."

"Not sure!"—with some indignation. "Mammy, you dream! What! after all the prayers that are said for her every Sunday twice. Well, I think it's a shame if she doesn't get there, that's all. Just think of all the time wasted on her! If only to show herself grateful to us, she ought to be very, very good."

"She is a good queen. I dare say it will be all right with her," says Cyclamen, smoothing the bright hair so near her hand.

Then there is a pause. Little Olive stares into the fire,—that still burns dimly, although it is on the edge of June,—and builds a thousand castles, that fall ere completed. Presently, rousing from her happy day-dreams, she speaks again.

"I'm thinking," she says, turning her large gaze confidentially upon the mother she adores, "that, after all, when the queen gets to heaven she may not like it."

"My dearest, what a sad thought! We shall be all happy there,—far happier than on this pretty earth; though it puzzles me to think how I shall ever be more contented than I am now with you, my sweet." (The child, rising, encircles her neck with fond white arms.) "How could the queen object to it?"

"But here, mammy, she is somebody; there she will be nobody,—not more, I mean, than you or me, or the little boys

that play Catherine-wheels in the street. I am afraid she will miss it,—all the power and grandeur, I mean."

"Olive, if you keep on thinking so hard you will go mad," says the mother, with a strange pang. "Or else you will grow unpleasantly clever, which some people think the same thing. People will never forgive you if you show more intellect than they do. Let your day-dreams be of fairies, darling, and of little tender sprites, and of your poor old mother."

"You are a very dear!" says Olive, rapturously, "and not a bit old. I shall give you twenty kisses to punish you for saying that."

"Two will be sufficient," says Lady Cyclamen: "it would be useless to extort more."

"How honest you are!" says Miss Olive, admiringly; "and when I know you are dying for them, too. No, indeed, I am not so mean as to put you off with two miserable kisses when I have promised twenty. You shall have the full number, and more, if you wish it."

With this she bestows them upon Cyclamen generously, carefully counting them, so that none shall escape her, and actually throwing in a twenty-first at the end, lest she should have missed one and so "done her out of any."

This task is scarcely accomplished when the door is thrown open and Mrs. Charteris is announced.

"Is it you, my fairest fair?" says Cyclamen, rising gladly to welcome her. "How sweet of you to come so soon! I was longing for you above all others." This is, perhaps, a faint exaggeration, but it is a pleasing one, and Fancy smiles. "Let me look at you," says Cyclamen, half quizzically, half earnestly. "What! your eyes undimmed, your whole air full of cruellest unconcern! Yet you must have heard of Scrope's untimely departure for the happy hunting-grounds of Canada."

"Even so."

"And you do not pine for a lover gone? But it is inconceivable,—almost unwomanly. There is surely something unusual in your tone. Oh, Fancy! you have not refused him?"

"Is that a question? And if I answer it will you promise not to make my answer public?"

"Faithfully."

"Then I did refuse him on Thursday night."

"How could you? I did not think the woman breathed who could refuse Scrope. After all I have taught you, to think you should decline the best match of the year! and when you must have known how it would annoy Lady Jane."

"Even that didn't tempt me. My good child, would you have me marry a man who did nothing but farm, farm, farm all the year round? I couldn't, you know. Why, he would always love me a little less than his prize pig, and I should be nowhere in comparison with his turnips. Then he would keep me out of my beloved London for at least ten months out of the twelve; and under those conditions life would indeed cease to be worth living."

"There is a great deal in what you say," says Cyclamen, pensively; "and certainly Scrope as a perpetual *vis-à-vis* might be improved on. Still, remember how much there is in that one word 'Marchioness.'"

"My dear, if you had had farm produce talked at you for three long months you would think as I do."

"Well, of course it was a drawback."

"It was. Anything like the time I put in because of a failure in his horrid sheep, you can't conceive,—Champions I think he called them, or Early Yorks, I don't remember which."

"Not Early Yorks, dear, certainly. I know those are melons,—a sort that grows in the open air."

"Well, then, greentops."

"Oh, no! those I know are cabbages," says Cyclamen, with all the triumphant air of suppressed conceit common to people who believe they possess knowledge superior to yours.

"I dare say you are right," returns Fancy, agreeably. "Indeed, it might be anything, for all I know, things got so mixed in my brain. But I thought it was cabbages he called Southdowns, and I still think he used to speak of those dismal sheep as Early Yorks, because he was always talking of some Yorkshire breed of something or other, and I suppose it was sheep."

"Pigs, more likely," says Cyclamen, unwilling to surrender her position.

"It will do, dear,"—with a faint yawn. "I'm sure I'm awfully glad he has gone to Canada. Let us hope he will find pigs, and sheep, and cows, and buffaloes over there in such plenty that he will abjure his native land."

"What a heartless remark! In your place, considering how badly you behaved to him, I should have cried my eyes out about him. I'm sure he was unhappy."

"Well, I cried, too," says Fancy, hastily: "I did indeed. I cried quite too dreadfully for half an hour the morning after I refused him. I literally sobbed for thirty minutes. I honestly believe I should be sobbing now but that Barker (you know what an invaluable creature Barker is) came into the room and reminded me of the concert I was bound to attend that evening. I bathed my eyes then with rose-water (that new sort: have you tried it?) until they were almost restored to their pristine beauty. But I really did fret horribly."

She gazes at her companion for sympathy, her lovely eyes full of distress that is really admirably done.

"Poor darling!" says Cyclamen; "I am sure a cup of tea will do you good. And now tell me of Arthur Blunden. Have you forgiven him?"

"Not yet. I shall never forgive him until I can cry quits with him. What! do you think I could so easily forego my revenge?"

"You are more cruel than I believed you. What did you do to him last night? He looked like a condemned criminal. Did you refuse him too?"

"No. On my honor. He did not give me the chance."

"He wanted to?"

"What a lawyer you would make! Well, perhaps he did. But the time and place and humor didn't suit me."

"I wonder you can behave so badly to him. I think him absolutely charming, and so devoted, dear fellow."

"Very. Specially charming about the eyes,—so dark, so pathetic, so adoring. He is, perhaps, just a little too devoted. A grave fault, if men would but learn it."

"You surely like him, dear?"

"Immensely. I think him one of the nicest men I know, if not the nicest. Both his clothes and manners are irreproachable."

"You praise him, yet you flout him, to use an old-fashioned word."

"Well, hardly that: I'm sure I'm intensely pretty to him. But I have learned, dearest, that charming lovers make bad husbands. I prefer my freedom to any man's love. And yet you must not think I am a man-hater. I esteem them highly, and they—as a rule—well, they all like me. There is scarcely a man of my acquaintance who does not burden me with a history of his griefs. They tell me of their debts; of their unfortunate attachments; of how heavily they were let in by the dark mare that was 'all their fancy' could possibly 'paint her,' but which (miserable animal!) in the end was found to be never really meant; of their tailors' bills, and their maiden aunt's brutality, who would not ruin herself to keep them in cigars. All their grievances I know at the tips of my fingers. And yet after marriage I believe any one of these men would tire of my sympathy and carry his grievances elsewhere."

"Oh, Fancy!"

"Forgive me if my speech sounds heretical. It is simply my own experience, and limited. Yet I confess to you, Cissy, there are at present six married men who (if I would allow them) would bore me every day with a recital of their wrongs."

"Six bad men!" says Cyclamen. "I know many who would scorn to do it."

"It takes an exception to prove a rule—— Ah, Olive! you little quiet child. How you creep into a room!—just like a small brown mouse. Give me a kiss, then, and tell mamma you must come and spend to-morrow with Elsie and Blanche."

"How are your little nieces?" asks Cyclamen. "I see them so often I forget to ask for them."

"Quite well, thank you. Why, Olive, what a delicious little gown! Who gave it you?"

"Mamma," says Olive. "It is the same as mamma's—do you remember?—her brown one."

"I remember it because it is the solitary becoming gown she possesses. By the by, Cis, do you generally go about in your chemise?"

"Eh!" says Cyclamen, naturally somewhat startled.

"I really mean it. Do you?"

"Well, not as a rule,"—mildly.

"I thought not, dearest, knowing what an old prude you are; yet yesterday two or three people said to me, 'When your cousin Lady Cyclamen is dressed, she is the most elegant woman in London.' What could that mean? I really wish you would give up those pronounced colors and wear something respectable. Just think what people say of you. *Undressed*, they say. It is almost indecent."

"You frighten me. To-morrow you shall call for me and take me into town and get me some clothes. I feel I have been too long *décolletée*."

Here the door is thrown open, and Kitty Blunden enters, followed by Brandy, who is evidently in great form. Arthur Blunden, arriving a few moments later, is vague in manner, and has a suppressed air of expectation about him that dies as his eyes rest lightly—only for an instant—on Fancy Charteris, and he sees "the beauty that is dearest to his heart."

His mind of late has not been unclouded. Jealousy, that fell destroyer of one's peace, has had possession of him, and, keeping closely at his elbow, has rendered his hours joyless, his meals tasteless, his pleasures too sad to be accounted such.

"So glad to see you, dear," says Cyclamen to Kitty. "I hardly hoped, with all your engagements, you would remember my day."

"A desire for gossip and your society has brought me," says Kitty, laughing, and pressing her lips to her friend's cheek. "I want to go through the 'chat of the fair' with you." Then she acknowledges Mrs. Charteris's presence very coldly. Cyclamen she likes. Most people do. Cyclamen, like Gretchen Dugdale, is a general favorite,—a sort of person one not only wants but is in a hurry to meet.

"What a charming day!" says Brandy, who has been lucky enough to secure a low seat near Mrs. Charteris.

"Yes," replies Fancy, "'A day to rest in a golden grove or to bask in a summer sky;' hardly a day for a weary town."

"Yet I wouldn't leave this town for all the golden groves in Europe," says Mr. Tremaine, enthusiastically. "Catch me at it. I can't say I'm very keen about 'groves'—unless, indeed,"—sentimentally,— "one had the person one fancied with one."

"What a singular remark!" says Mrs. Charteris, laughing. "How many *ones* did you put in it? Oh!"—a little ner-

vously, as some one trips over a footstool and almost precipitates himself into her arms.

"It's only the 'Curlew,'" says Brandy, with a light laugh; whereupon Mr. Dinmont—for it is he—treats him to an annihilating glance. But Brandy is not to be annihilated. He is quite above all that sort of thing, and goes on genially, if a little maliciously, enjoying his rival's confusion.

"Did you ever hear that story, Mrs. Charteris, about Dinmont's curlew, you know?—that marvellous bird he introduced into poor Gray's Elegy? No? Then I shall tell it to you."

"You can amuse her (if you *can*) with the sweepings of your brain," says Dandy, wrathfully; "but I assure you, Mrs. Charteris, the story has nothing to do with me. I am quite innocent of the Elegy's murder, I assure you."

"Dear me! it promises to be what Toddy would call a very 'bluggy' story," says Mrs. Charteris. "But may I hear it, Mr. Dinmont? Horrors have a strange fascination for me."

"Hear it, by all means," says Dandy, with an angry laugh. "It may interest you, as you have not heard it before. But you must really excuse me if I decline to listen to it for the twentieth time. Old jokes lose their zest and grow oppressive, and Tremaine's jokes as a rule are old." With this poisoned dart he turns and walks frowningly away, and is presently cut to the heart on hearing his divinity laughing gayly over the story so hurtful to his *amour-propre*. Indeed, Brandy is evidently in his element, and goes on from one tale of his late friend to another, each—as told by him—funnier than the last. Dandy, gloomy and enraged, draws nearer, listening to him, and watching his opportunity to crush him.

"He went a regular perisher, you know," Brandy is saying, gayly, "and made a most horrid ass of himself. But some fellows never know where to draw the line."

"I know a fellow could draw the 'line,'" says Dandy, viciously, with a malignant smile that ends in a fond chuckle at his own wit,—“could draw it to any amount, and get complimented in glowing language (language that regularly seared and burned) by the colonel afterwards. Been to dine with the 61st lately, Tremaine?” (The old familiar “Brandy” has been long since dropped.)

"No; have you?" asks Brandy, indignantly; and, a wordy war being imminent, Arthur Blunden, who is near, comes to the rescue.

"Talking of the 61st reminds one of the 60th," he says, somewhat absurdly, "in that it instantly reminds every one of the young man who wished to enter the 14th, to be near his brother, who was in the 15th. And that reminds me of your cousin, Mrs. Charteris,—Jim Lisle, I mean. I saw him to-day. He is looking very well indeed: and they all tell me he is much improved; in fact, never—never——"

"Gets drunk?" questions Fancy, calmly. "Why mince matters? We all know what Jimmy was—a perfect nuisance. I'm sure I'm very glad to hear your news,—if it be true. We used to call him our 'Liquid Jim.' I can't endure that sort of person myself. One is never sure whether he isn't coming to see one in a state too horrible for description. Still, I am glad to hear good of him, and that he is 'himself again,' like that unpleasant Richard. When Jimmy was sober he was very nice indeed, and I was quite fond of him."

"I wish to goodness I was Jimmy, even with all his peccadilloes on his head," says Brandy, fondly gazing at Mrs. Charteris.

"Don't be rash," says Mrs. Charteris. "You are much more desirable as you are. When I think of Jimmy I always remember the last night I saw him in Belgrave Square. You know that is where the dear duchess lives. It was a musical affair; and, as they always do that sort of thing as cheaply as possible, they get their friends to assist them. They haven't many friends, so they fell back on me. 'Mrs. Charteris, will you play something?' said Lady Jane, addressing me in her most frigid style. I know I don't go down palatably with Lady Jane, in spite of my being something of a musician," says Mrs. Charteris, modestly, who is an absolute genius where the harp and piano are concerned. "'With pleasure,' I said, innocently, shutting up my fan with a little click. I confess I felt unamiable that night. 'Is it to be whist or loo?' You should have seen her face! 'Whist!' echoed she, with a horrified start, looking even leaner than usual. 'I am talking of music,—the harp,—the piano!' 'I am sorry,' returned I, as demurely as I could (because I was shaking with laughter), 'but I really cannot oblige you. As

you probably know, I never play anything but cards.' Poor Lady Jane sailed away without another word, piety and disgust finely mingled in her countenance."

As she finishes this little story, she laughs gayly, and glances at Arthur Blunden, to see how it has affected him.

"She understood, of course, what you meant,—that you wouldn't play?" asked he.

"Yes. But she hid her knowledge. I suppose she thought—like the old play—that where 'ignorance is bliss it is folly to be *otherwise*.'"

The room has filled gradually. Every one is talking of every one else to their nearest neighbor in the softest tones, that belie the severity of the remarks made. Cyclamen, wearying of old women, and sage talk, and company manners in general, comes over to Fancy presently, and sinks down upon a chair near her, with a heavy sigh born of mental exhaustion.

Kitty Blunden, who is close to her, smiles.

"Do you find your duties too onerous?" she asks. "You look done up. I think it is all the different conversations one goes through—trying to suit each person's mind—that is the strain. The sudden change 'from grave to gay, from lively to severe,' is very trying."

"It is, to me especially, who by nature am indolent. Sometimes I feel it so much that I doubt I'm growing old."

"Oh, Cis, how rude of you!" says Fancy, breaking into the discussion, with a charming pout; "when you know you are only two years older than I am."

"But I look and feel five years older. You might be painted as 'perennial Spring,' my dear: you look barely eighteen."

"Flatterer!" says Fancy.

"I never flatter,"—simply. "You know tradesmen and those kind of people invariably call you 'Miss.'"

"Yes,"—with a little shrug; "it is really horrible. Somehow it offends me. I'm sure I paid for my title as dearly as any one, therefore why shouldn't I get it?"

"You should take one of the children about with you," says Cyclamen, alluding to Fancy's two little nieces.

"Ah!" says Fancy; and then she laughs, as one might

who is amused at some quaint recollection. "Did I never tell you of my disastrous defeat?" she says, merrily. "I quite thought, like you, you know, that a child would be a sort of patent of respectability and age, and all that, until one day, some months ago, when I took Blanche out with me. We went down Regent Street,—her one great desire (in fact, the dream of her life is to go down Regent Street). So we went. But just as we found ourselves opposite 'Louise's' she said she was tired and could not stir another step. I left my carriage at Lady Blount's, so had to call a cab. The pavement was crowded. I stepped into the cab first and then beckoned to the man to put Blanche in also. He was evidently of a genial disposition. He smiled. 'I was near forgetting your baby, miss!' said he. I gave in then. I acknowledged Blanche a failure; and I leaned back in the cab and maintained a demure silence until I reached Lady Blount's."

Cyclamen laughs heartily, so does Brandy Tremaine; Arthur Blunden smiles; Kitty looks disgusted, and, pretending not to have heard, lays her hand on Arthur's arm and compels him by a gesture to accompany her across the room.

"Dear me!" says Fancy, blushing a little, as she sees Arthur's departure,—not knowing it is enforced,—and notices the coldness of Kitty's expression, "I am afraid I have horrified Lady Blunden. I quite forgot she and—and—her cousin were so near. Why didn't you tell me, Cis?"

"I saw no necessity. Kitty is not a prude."

"No. But she dislikes me," says Fancy, shrewdly.

In this she is right: Kitty does dislike her, the more in that she is afraid of her. She cannot conquer a longing, foolish, but perhaps natural desire to speak of her at all times to Sir John, who, as I have already said, is not only obtuse but very wanting in tact.

To-night, as Kitty in her bedroom is dressing for a ball at Mrs. Redesdale's, Sir John comes in to tell her of some stupid story or silly bit of scandal heard at his club. Presently the conversation drifts, until, reaching Fancy Charteris, it anchors firmly there.

"I think she says the oddest things," Kitty says, unable to resist censuring the woman she abhors and fears. And then she tells him in her severest manner of Fancy's little story

about the undiscerning cabman. "And she said it all without a smile, just as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world. It was to Cyclamen she told it, but Arthur and Brandy and I heard every word of it."

Sir John sits down and gives way to irrepressible laughter.

"Well, you must confess she is amusing," he says.

"I think her horrible," returns Kitty, reproachfully. "To tell such a *risqué* story, and out loud too, before half a dozen men! It was abominable."

"I dare say she didn't mean them to hear."

"Perhaps not. But she should have thought of it. That is just what I object to in her. She is full of a thoughtlessness that might well be termed recklessness. I believe if half London had been at her side she would have told that story just the same."

"I shouldn't wonder," says Sir John, still palpably amused. "But, after all, there wasn't very much in it."

"Quite too much. It certainly wasn't form."

"How did Brandy behave under the trying circumstances?"

"Need you ask? He laughed immoderately. Nearly as much"—slowly—"as you laugh now."

"And Arthur?"

"He smiled."

"And Cyclamen?"

"She—she laughed too," confesses Kitty, who would have given anything to be able to say truthfully that Cyclamen was as openly disgusted as she was. But she is too honest to lie.

"I thought Cyclamen was your pattern saint?"

"I must say she surprised me. It was very unlike Cyclamen. I saw nothing to laugh at."

"Shall I tell you something, Kitty?" says Sir John, clasping his hands behind his head and regarding his wife quizzically. "Mrs. Charteris has been unfortunate enough to offend you in some way, and therefore she couldn't amuse you. You are prejudiced against her. Confess, now, you don't like her?"

"Well, I don't," says Kitty. She looks at him wistfully, and wonders if indeed he is ignorant of the reason for her dislike. "I wish you didn't like her either," she says, a little sadly.

"If it would please you, I wish I didn't," returns he, with a faint yawn. "But, unhappily, our likes and dislikes are beyond our control. I think her a very charming woman, and good-natured too. I wonder what it is she has done to annoy you?"

"Nothing,"—hastily, vexation and a touch of *hauteur* in her tone. "It is quite impossible she should ever annoy me. But I am not singular in this dislike. She appears to me to have few friends; and I hear she treats her little nieces, her poor dead sister's children, very cruelly."

"What an awful charge! What does she do to them? You open up visions of birch rods and prison fare."

"She neglects them. One never sees them. She does not take them driving or walking, or——"

"She evidently took the child Blanche for a walk. Don't wrong her too bitterly."

"She never speaks of them, poor children, that should be as dear to her as her own."

"She hasn't any of her own; so I suppose they are dearer. Do you know I think she has acted very admirably towards those children? They are left without a penny, and she even refused to give them up to the father's family,—the Melrose people,—because, she said to me, they were too poor to do them any justice, and she couldn't let Alice's children want for anything."

"She talks very prettily," says Kitty, bitterly, "and certainly she has a staunch defender in you. I am dressed, Jack. We shall be late"—coldly—"if you sit there any longer singing Mrs. Charteris's praises."

CHAPTER XXI.

"Oh, 'tis the curse in love, and still approved,
When women cannot love where they're beloved."

THE band is playing *Mon rêve* softly and with exquisite meaning. Pretty women are waltzing lightly and smiling sweetly, and doing all the damage that lips (false, but perfect) can do. The rooms are crowded. Here and there great banks of greenest moss make beds for roses that lie upon them in all their cream and pink and crimson beauty, sleepily breathing forth their perfume.

Lady Blunden is the acknowledged belle of Mrs. Redesdale's ball. Rarely has "handsome Kitty Tremaine" looked so handsome. There is in her large eyes a deeper shade, in her cheeks a richer color, in her whole air an increase of gayety, charming yet undesirable. She is, too, a little kinder to Cecil Launceston than she has ever been before, and dances with him and openly permits his attentions (which are, if the most respectful, *bien entendu*) in a manner hitherto foreign to her.

Gretchen—who has been actually driven to this ball by Kenneth—regards her with an anxiety that puzzles herself, and, though unable to account for her uneasiness, wishes secretly she would not make herself quite so remarkable with Mr. Launceston.

Sir John, happily oblivious of everything but the passing moment, is dancing rather more often than is good for him with Fancy Charteris,—so often that Arthur Blunden's frown deepens, and his breath comes a little hard, and a shade falls and settles upon his face.

"It is impossible she can mean it," he mutters, in a miserably uncertain tone; and then he goes over to Fancy and claims her for the next dance which is his. When it is over, she glances at him mischievously.

"What misfortune has befallen you?" she asks. "You remind one of a man in a picture by somebody called 'Doleful Dumps.'" (Fancy is always delightfully vague.)

"'Man is born to misfortune,'—you know that," returns he, with a half-smile. "But—but I wish you would not dance again with Blunden."

"With whom? Blunden? Do you mean yourself? I'm sure"—in an aggrieved tone—"I haven't danced so very often with you that you need take me to task. And, besides, I didn't ask you."

There is sufficient truth in all this to irritate him.

"Nonsense," he says, a little brusquely. "You know I mean Sir John."

"I know nothing, except that you always talk conundrums, and they are very wearying to the constitution. I, for one, never guessed one in my life. So you may as well tell me the answer to this: Why am I not to dance with Sir John?"

"After all that has passed,"—meaningly,—“I think it will be as well for you not to do so.”

"Dear Mr. Blunden, you grow 'curiouser and curiouser.' Why, positively that stupid Sphinx was nothing to you,"—with an air of genuine admiration very prettily done. "As for me, I know nothing that has passed; and it can hardly signify to me whether I dance with Sir John or not. And if it pleases him to dance with me, poor fellow (I dance very well),"—innocently,—“I don't see how I can refuse him.”

"It is rather unkind to Lady Blunden, is it not?" says he, in a very low tone, without looking at her.

"I don't understand,"—coldly. "And Sir John, of course, knows what is best. I should not dream of dictating."

"At least it is unkind to me," says Arthur, desperately. "If for no other reason, do not dance with him again, for my sake."

Mrs. Charteris changes color.

"Now, why did you not say all that before?" she says, with a very sweet smile, that lingers on him, and which, in conjunction with the blush, renders her lovely. "It is quite another thing. Yes, to please you, I promise not to dance again with Sir John to-night."

"Fancy," says Arthur, his heart beating quickly at this unexpected surrender, "if I dared hope——"

What he dares is lost, as Brandy at this instant makes his presence felt; and at his heels, hard following, comes Dandy.

"Ah! Mr. Tremaine, is it really you?" says Fancy, pleas-

antly, smiling a welcome at the infatuated Brandy; "and you too, Mr. Dinmont?" directing another smile no whit less sweet at the devoted Dandy. "I had no idea I should have the good fortune to meet you both to-night. But the gods are kind. Have you been here long?"

"Yes,—that is, rather. I thought—— You are late, aren't you?" returns Brandy, hastily and incoherently, fearing his rival may cut in before him and gain the advantage of a smile or look that might be intercepted.

"I meant to be early," says Fancy, contritely. "I can't think how it is I am always late. Perhaps"—with a little glance at Brandy—"I might have hurried myself had I known who was awaiting me."

Brandy is in the seventh heaven, Dandy in the lowest depths of despair. Mrs. Charteris has been too long a practised coquette not to be aware of the smothered rage and jealousy on her left hand.

"Why did I not see you yesterday?" she asks Dinmont, addressing him suddenly. "I quite expected you up to five o'clock, but you never came. Better employed, no doubt."

"Did you expect me?"—rapturously. "I didn't know. I wasn't sure. May I call to-morrow?"

"Oh, you must call to-morrow, or I shall never forgive your neglect," says Mrs. Charteris, with a faint laugh.

"Do not let us waste any more of this music," Blunden breaks in, half impatiently; and Mrs. Charteris, laying her hand on his arm, moves towards the ball-room. Yet she cannot resist a parting shaft.

"Mr. Dinmont, may I trouble you to hold my fan until I return? But perhaps—no doubt you will be dancing—and——"

"No, no, indeed; I do not care about dancing," says Dandy, eagerly, taking the fan, casting at his late friend a glance of undisguised triumph. "I shall stay here until you come back."

"Thank you so much,"—sweetly. Then, turning to Brandy, who is scowling at the lucky Dinmont, "Mr. Tremaine, keep my card safely, will you? I can't tell you how it torments me; and I know you will take care of it."

With this she leaves; and the rivals, with their backs to the wall, await her coming again in utter silence.

"What a wicked little thing you are!" says Blunden, half reprovingly.

"It is my nature to," replies she, so plaintively that an instant finish is put to all scolding.

Seeing Sir John coming towards them at the close of this dance, as they stand together in a conservatory, Arthur says, hurriedly,—

"Remember your promise."

"Do you distrust me?" returns she, with a little frown so full of reproach that as Sir John reaches her Arthur moves away to a distance that places him quite beyond hearing, and leaves her her freedom to accept or reject his cousin's attentions.

Yet Sir John, for once, pleads in vain for a dance. "Her card is full,—quite full. No, he need not look; he must believe her when she says so. Is it so strange, then, that no vacant place should be seen on her programme?" and so on.

Sir John accepts defeat, but lingers idly, talking to her, until she almost loses patience.

"What a charming dress yours is!" he says, presently, a genuine note of admiration running through his tone, as though he feels himself compelled to offer homage to the robe in question. "All the other women's dresses look paltry and in bad taste when compared with yours. You are like an old picture."

"Am I?" murmurs she, with saucy promptness. "Shall I tell you something? Old pictures look better at a distance. One gets a more satisfactory view. Go to the other end of the room, now, and see if I'm not right."

"Is that a dismissal?" demands he, with a light laugh.

"If you wish to think so," retorts she, with a faint grimace. And, being at times master of *some* wisdom, he takes the hint and departs.

He has hardly disappeared when Dandy and Brandy, who have both been watching their opportunity, saunter up to her, to Arthur Blunden's disgust.

"I see you have two dances still disengaged," says Brandy, restoring her card, and speaking with the becoming diffidence of a young man who is hopelessly enamored of the object addressed. "May I have one of them?"

"What is it? Lancers? Certainly," says Mrs. Charteris. "But it is a square dance, and you may not care for it."

"Oh, sha'n't I!" says Tremaine, glowing with delight. He is about to be effusive; when Dandy (who has pushed his way, with considerable pluck and much want of breeding, through a crowd of dancers, with her huge fan held conspicuously in his hand) says, hurriedly,—

"Won't you give me one dance, Mrs. Charteris?" His tone is miserable; he is filled with anguish at his rival's success.

"If I have one," says Fancy, who is kindness itself to some people. "Yes,—here it is; but it is a quadrille. Is that too slow for you? Too great an infliction? We can sit it out, you know, which will be even pleasanter, and certainly cooler."

She never bestows fast dances upon tyros, and Dandy she believes inexperienced in the art of the divine Terpsichore.

"Thanks awfully," says poor Dinmont, deeply grateful for this small mercy.

"The next has begun, and it is ours," says Brandy, proudly, offering her his arm; whereupon, in spite of Blunden's impatience and Dandy's misery, she has to depart. Perhaps she rather enjoys both in her secret heart.

"I am afraid you are a little wicked," she says to Brandy, during a pause in the dance.

At twenty-four to be called "wicked" is inexpressibly sweet. Tremaine at all events is intensely flattered.

"Oh, no; I'm not really, you know," he says. "You mustn't misjudge me; but I can't bear to see you talking to Dinmont, or—or any fellow,—if that is what you mean; so I hurried you away. You can't blame me for that. A fellow can't help being fond of you, can he?"

"Yet I think I can see something malicious in your eyes," says Fancy, gazing into the foolish boy's handsome eyes with a quiet intentness that makes his pulses throb.

"You mistake me," he says, softly: "I am the most amiable fellow alive; at least I used to be, you know, before—before I met you. How can I be otherwise just now? When one is intensely happy there is seldom room for discontent, and discontent alone creates wickedness."

"Thank you. I know no one who makes me such pretty speeches as you do."

"I wish I dared believe all you say. Do you want to turn my head?" says Brandy, eagerly.

"Not just now," replies she, so softly, and with such palpable meaning in her tone, that Brandy says, still more eagerly,—

"Why?"

"Because, as you now are, you can look at me, and—I can look at you; and"—says this arch-flirt caressingly—"if you turned your head ever so slightly all such enjoyment would be at an end!"

"I wonder if you mean half what you say?" says Brandy, bewildered.

"I should," says Mrs. Charteris, with some faint satire that falls harmless; "I say so little!"

Then the dance is over and the music ceases, and those Lancers—so far beyond all other Lancers that were ever danced—come to an end, and Dandy joins them, and Arthur Blunden too. Arthur is *distracted* and silent to a fault, until Sir John Blunden, sauntering up presently, compels him to speech. Fancy amuses Sir John. Indeed, it is with difficulty he keeps himself from her side when she is present, though indolence prevents him from actually seeking her society.

"Have you seen Lady Jane?" he asks, addressing Fancy. "She looks rather done up."

"*Passé* you mean, perhaps?" Arthur breaks in hurriedly. "The word hardly applies. Any one might look done up, however young."

"Well, the 'bloom' can't be always 'on the rye,'" says Brandy, reflectively; whereat Mrs. Charteris laughs and shakes her blonde head at him reprovingly, which so far encourages Mr. Tremaine that he goes on exuberantly:

"She reminds me, don't you know," he says, "of those lines of Wordsworth. She might be one of his ghostly group, she is so lean. Do you remember them?—

'Strange and uncouth; dire faces, figures dire;
Sharp-kneed, sharp-elbowed, and lean-ankled too,
With long and ghostly shanks; forms which once seen
Could never be forgotten!'

"What on earth is a shank?" asks Sir John; but nobody heeds him. "Really, Tremaine, you know, you ought to think before you speak."

"Yes, that's the worst of Lady Jane," says Fancy, pensively: "one can't forget her. How one wishes one could! But really"—with generous emphasis—"she looks older than she is. How can she be fresh at night, when she will get up at five o'clock in the morning, because that handsome curate at St. Mathias's tells her it is good for her morals, or her digestion, or something?"

"The early bird catches the worm," remarks Arthur, sententiously.

"Horrid thing a worm!" says Mr. Dinmont, who has been silent for some time; "goes wriggling, you know, all over the place, and looks so jolly uncomfortably slimy all the time. Wouldn't have it at any price. Got to offer me something pleasanter than a worm to make an early bird of me."

"Awfully clever fellow Dinmont," says Brandy, with affected enthusiasm; "makes such original remarks; only I hope he wasn't describing Lady Jane's pet curate. It's vulgar to call names, you know, and 'slimy' isn't a pretty word."

"Yet I think it quite expresses Mr. Mildmay," says Fancy, calmly, coming to Dinmont's rescue.

"I wish Lady Jane could hear you," says Brandy, unabashed. "By the by, if she doesn't propose to him soon she will be treating the poor man very badly, don't you think?—downright dishonorably. She has shown him the greatest attention—the most particular—all the season."

"She doesn't mean anything by that," says Blunden. "It is only a little way she has."

"Yes," murmurs Brandy, *sotto voce*. "She is such an artless thing."

"Better that than a heartless thing," says Mr. Dinmont, with deep meaning, casting a glance that is almost tragic at Mrs. Charteris, who catches it, plays with it a while, and then flings it back to him daintily gilded.

"I doubt you are a sad flirt," she says to him, in a soft whisper inaudible to the others that brings the quick light of gratification to his eyes. (It is almost as nice to be called a "sad flirt" as a "wicked young man" when one is under thirty.)

"I thought she rather affected Launceston," says Arthur,

alluding to Lady Jane; "she used to make much of him at one time."

"Until he told that little story about the naughty boy and the apple-tree," says Fancy. "You know it? No? Then you must hear it. Cecil was growing rather tired of her attentions, and one day, when she was showing him off before a very select goody-goody audience as a reformed young man, he began to tell her a small tale that sounded in the beginning like something out of a Sunday magazine. Every one settled down to listen. He was Jane's *protégé*, and should be heard; and Cecil, seeing how rapt were the listeners, waxed eloquent. It was all about a very bad little boy named Robert, who would not give all his pennies to the Church missionaries. Cecil dwelt upon his misdemeanors in a tone too awful to transcribe, until, as he approached the point that was to show the fearful end that overtook this graceless lad, his voice sunk to a solemn whisper. Every one was delighted, and Lady Jane was absolutely revelling in the sensation created by her convert, when Cecil wound up his tale. I'm sure he had learned it by heart. 'And so he went from bad to worse, from one evil course to another, until October came, and the leaves began to fall. Then—he—fell—too.' He paused and sighed. 'Into fresh sin?' interrupted Lady Jane, dismally, but with evident enjoyment. 'Not exactly,' said Cecil, calmly; 'it was from the top of a high apple-tree he was successfully robbing he fell; and—he didn't break his arm!' You should have seen their faces. His tone betrayed him, and the glance he could not help casting at me, —for I was present. Lady Jane never forgave him. She ignored him after that, and, as Cyclamen says, let disappointed vanity, 'like a worm i' the bud, feed on her damask cheek.'"

"Well, it was just as well she gave him up," says Dinmont, who is one of those unhappy youths who always say the wrong thing without meaning it, "as she would have felt it rather now, being cut out by Lady Blunden."

There is a dead pause. Sir John, adjusting his glass carefully, stares blankly at the unconscious Dandy, and then, almost without his knowledge, lets his eyes wander to where Kitty—handsome, brilliant—is standing at the other side of the room conversing with Cecil Launceston.

"O tempora, O mores!" says Arthur to Fancy, in a low tone, with an expressive glance at the luckless Dandy.

"Very good times, I think," says Mrs. Charteris, wilfully misunderstanding him. "I think nowadays we women have the best of it. At least"—lightly—"one can't have one's dress torn from the gathers. Do you know what that means? Or what a Princesse robe signifies? I don't know anything more trying to one's temper than a clumsy foot,—a sudden check,—and then the awful sound that tells one one's skirt and body have parted company. At least we have done with all that."

Sir John has disappeared. Dandy and Brandy are somewhat aloof. Arthur, telling her she looks tired, leads the way to a small room, half boudoir, half conservatory, so full it is with flowers, that lies off the ball-room.

"What a cosy little nook! Just like Laura, is it not?" asks Fancy, as they enter. But he does not answer. Glancing at him in surprise, she sees a look in his face (she has seen it pretty often) that stays all further remarks, and renders her on the present occasion—almost nervous.

"Was it because I asked you you refused to dance again with Blunden?" he asks, with a quietude that is hardly in consonance with his eyes.

"How can one tell the exact motive that compels one to an action?" returns she, evasively. She has a soft red rose in her hand, and is somewhat nervously pulling it to pieces. Her head is lowered; her eyes are fastened on her work of destruction. Arthur, taking both the hands and the flower, crushes them between his own.

"Answer me *faithfully*," he says; "*did* you refuse him because I asked you?"

"Perhaps so. How can I be sure?" says Fancy, with a charming glance from under her long lashes. "Yet I suppose so. I gave you my promise, did I not?"

"Give me something else," says Blunden, with suppressed but honest passion; "give me—yourself."

Fancy pales perceptibly and shrinks from him. For an instant she raises her eyes to his and then lets them fall again, as though to conceal from him the triumph and satisfaction that fill them,—and something else, perhaps, stronger and purer than either of these.

"Do not turn from me," says Arthur, quickly. "Let me speak now, *here*. I have so much to say; and yet"—impatiently—"I know not how to say it. I feel tongue-tied, incapable. But why need I bore you with mere words? The whole thing lies in one short sentence: I love you."

"Oh, no," says Mrs. Chartaris, slowly. And now in her expressive eyes triumph has certainly gained the day. "You forget: how could you have imagined it possible to love 'that sort of person'?"

Her victory is complete. His color darkens, deepens. He drops her hands, nay, almost flings them from him; so that the poor pretty rose falls sadly to the ground. Something in her face, in her manner, has betrayed to him the truth.

"You mean——" he begins, huskily.

But she interrupts him with sudden haste:

"Nothing,—nothing, indeed. And you"—demurely—"I am sure mean just as little."

"I am not one to care about the 'quip courteous,'" returns he, sternly. "You know as well as I do what I mean. Tell the truth now at last. Have you led me up to this point only to refuse me? Are you so paltry that the mere satisfaction of a poor revenge could tempt you to wreck another's happiness,—the happiness, too, of one who trusted you?"

She is silent.

"Speak," says Arthur, with increasing sternness. But still she remains speechless.

Her hands—now empty of flowers—are clasped and hang loosely before her. Her head is bent; her face is white as snow that drifts in winter. She is a little frightened for the first time in all her life, and her heart beats violently.

"Let us end it now forever, one way or the other," says Blunden, with sudden calm. "Am I to understand that all your pretty looks and flattering words were lies?—that from the first you calculated on this moment?"

"Yes—but——" confesses she, hurriedly, yet full of an eager anxiety to explain some thought, some feeling that rests deep down within her heart. But he will not listen.

"No; no more! it is too late!" he exclaims, with a gesture that has in it something of loathing; and, turning from her, he lays his arms upon the sash of the window and hides his face upon them.

A breathless silence follows. No one enters; no living thing approaches their solitude. Even the music has ceased. The two in Laura Redesdale's pet boudoir are as utterly alone as though miles—instead of two rooms—divide them from the laughing world beyond. A fear that is almost agony (born of his last contemptuous look) chills Fancy's heart.

"Arthur——" she says, at length, nervously laying her hand upon his arm.

But the overture is not received with kindness.

"Don't touch me," he says, roughly, with a quick indrawing of the breath, and shakes the soft delicate fingers from his arm as though they burn him. The action, though natural, is discourteous, and, raising in Mrs. Charteris's mind faint feelings of indignation, restores her to self-control. And with self-control comes the knowledge that here is an opportunity not to be despised,—one, indeed, to be seized upon by any true woman as a means of righting herself by placing her opponent in the wrong.

"Oh!" murmurs she, in an accent that is almost a sob, "how you have hurt my poor hand!"

Arthur makes no sign.

"It is growing quite red," goes on the little witch in a still more tearful tone,—without evoking any sympathy.

"I really think it is broken," cries she, at last, with a veritable sob this time that goes to his heart. A man, as a rule, can stand a good deal, but this is too much for Blunden.

"What a brute I am!" he says, wearily, rousing himself, and, taking the small hand in question, examines it carefully. No bruise, no faintest mark, can be seen; nevertheless he appears stricken with remorse. Indeed, it would be impossible to feel otherwise with those lovely eyes, blue as the skies, and rich with tears, gleaming up at one.

"I sha'n't see you for some time again," he goes on, hurriedly, gazing at her in a strange manner, as though he would imprint upon his brain each line of her fair face. "Never again, I think—I hope——"

"After to-morrow," interrupts she, quickly. "You promised to bring me flowers for Lady Cardine's ball. Have you forgotten? You must not disappoint me."

"No. You shall have them."

"And you will bring them to-morrow?"

"Certainly I shall not," says Arthur, with a heavy frown. "What! is your game not yet played out? Have you no compassion? Is my punishment so incomplete, then, that you desire to prolong it? No, you shall have your flowers, but I shall not bring them. I shall never"—with mournful certainty—"bring you flowers again!"

"Then do not send them. I refuse them. I shall not wear them,—not if they were there forever," says Fancy, in a little choked voice, with a petulance that is almost childish.

She is trifling with the leaves of a dark plant near her. Seldom has she looked so lovable, so sweet as now, when full of a grief, real or feigned. How can he tell which it is?

"Do come to-morrow," she says, in a little whisper, raising her eyes to his for a moment. They are drowned in tears. Her words are tender, her manner is beseeching. Blunden, losing his head, stoops forward, and, taking her in his arms, kisses her once passionately. Then he releases her, and, before she can recover her self-possession, is gone, leaving Beauty half startled, half angry, and with her soft cheeks wet with the common signs of woe.

Perhaps—though she would have died rather than confess it even to herself—her greatest grief lies in the discovery that he really is gone out of reach of all witcheries and enslaving arts. She dries her eyes with pensive care, and, sinking into a cosy little chair, reviews the situation.

"Well, at least I have had my revenge," she says, half aloud, tapping the back of one hand lightly against the palm of the other. "Yes, a revenge. It is sweet, they say, especially to women. Why, then I can't be half a woman, so little sweet it seems to me. Perhaps I have not had revenge enough. That may be it. And yet— Yes, I should like to make him propose to me a second time all over again; and—and—of course—of course I should give him just the same answer then."

* * * * *

Meantime night is waning, and the hours are flying on-wards, hurrying with swift strides towards the unknown.

Gretchen, who has refused to dance all night, with saddened face is standing all alone, not watching the pretty forms flitting past her, but looking rather into the realm of grief and bewilderment and quick love we call our hearts.

She has said some little thing, some lightest word of warning, to Kitty about Cecil Launceston ; but, gentle as the word was, it had been badly received ; and Gretchen, shrinking back into herself, is now puzzling her pure brain with an impossible problem, with eyes downcast and clouded.

She has just begun to accuse herself of harboring base suspicions, when a voice addressing her brings her back for the moment to a day long past. She starts slightly, and, raising her head, sees Scarlett—now Lord Danvers—standing beside her.

"How d'ye do, Mrs. Dugdale?" he says, holding out his hand in a fashion half supercilious, half imploring. His face is very pale ; and Gretchen, as she returns his greeting and mechanically lays her hand in his, having believed him in Italy, and because of that last scene in the morning-room at the Towers, which comes back to her and him with vivid force, blushes distinctly,—so distinctly that all the women standing near smile inwardly, and lift their brows, and flutter their fans meaningly, and look upon the ground, and tell each other presently in soft whispers that, after all, the most saint-like are often the worst, and that no good ever came of that sort of thing. And what could one expect of a woman who had married a cripple for his money? And every one knew how it had been with her and Scarlett, and how she had calmly jilted him. And nowadays to blush ! Such wretched form ! Quite bad taste ; almost indecent ; and so on.

"Will you not speak to me?" says Scarlett, quietly, but with evident agitation.

"I am glad to see you," says Gretchen, very gently.

"Are you, honestly? I suppose"—with an unlovely laugh—"I am not yet forgiven my heinous crime, as your tone belies your words."

There is an expression in his handsome face—not so much dissipation as discontent—that makes her sorry for him.

"You mistake me," she says, with kind earnestness. "I am indeed glad to see you looking well."

Perhaps he had madly hoped for more enthusiasm in her reception, or this sudden meeting with her killed all saner resolutions. Be that as it may, a dark shade crosses his brow.

"You modify your first words," he says, determined to

misconstrue her meaning. "You were always, if I remember rightly, candor itself. 'Glad to see me' and 'Glad to see me well' bear different meanings. You would, perhaps, have been even nearer the truth had you gone a little farther and said you would be glad to see me—well, at a distance."

"How changed you are, Tom!" says Gretchen, with sweetest reproach. And then Tom gives in, and takes her down to her carriage in utter silence, but with a heart filled to overflowing. So does she transform—by one tender speech—a possible enemy into a lifelong friend.

Stealing past Kenneth's door on tiptoe (having dismissed her sleepy maid from further attendance), Gretchen is brought to a stand-still by hearing her name called.

"Is that you, Gretchen? Come in: I am awake," says Dugdale. And, opening his door, she enters. Flinging her opera-cloak to one side, she goes up to his bed.

"It is too bad," she says. "I knew if I went out you would not sleep, but would lie awake listening for my footsteps. Waiting or expecting anything destroys rest. Now your head will ache to-morrow, and I shall have myself to blame for it."

"Then it sha'n't ache," replies he, laughing. "What a little fidget you are! Forget me, and tell me all about Laura's ball. Was it a success? You look just as pretty and as fresh as when you left home this evening. Did you dance much?"

"Not very much."

"Whom did you dance with?"

"I danced a quadrille with Jack, for one."

"A quadrille! That was slow for you, who are so fond of waltzing, and Jack such a good fellow at that! Whom else did you dance with?"

"To tell you the truth, darling, I did not dance with any one else," says Gretchen, blushing until the tears stand in her eyes. "I couldn't. Don't send me to any more balls, Ken; I don't enjoy them: I hate them. How could I dance when I know you are here lonely, all by yourself, and when I am longing to be with you?"

Dugdale's expression changes and grows sad. He flings one arm impatiently above his head and sighs heavily.

"It seems so hard on you," he says, wistfully. "You

used to love all that sort of thing,—dancing, I mean, and balls, and amusements of all kinds. And now I wonder you don't hate me, Gretchen. It is your ill-fated marriage with me that has stolen from you your youth, or at least your enjoyment of it."

Gretchen does not answer immediately; she hesitates for a little while, to scan his face, as though she would read his inmost heart. This is one of Gretchen's pretty ways,—to pause at unexpected moments, as if desirous of making her reply all it should be,—and it has its charm. There is a restfulness, a sense of peace about her, a blessed lack of haste, that suggests calm, and is essentially sweet.

"Solon had not half your wisdom," she says, at length, with a soft but mocking smile. "How thoroughly you comprehend the real facts of the case, and how rude you can be! My youth (in spite of your vile insinuations) has *not* departed. Only to-night I overheard many people saying all kinds of flattering things about this old lady,"—laying her hands lightly on her bosom,—“and twice I heard myself called ‘Pretty Mrs. Dugdale.’ Do you hear that, sir? ‘*Pretty Mrs. Dugdale*’!”

"It was too weak a word: you are too lovely to be merely pretty," returns he, fondly. "Yet I wish you had come home to tell me you had danced all night and had found pleasure in it. How is it you have lost all heart for it? I sometimes fear you let sad thoughts of me distress your gayest hours; and the idea renders me miserable."

"And I fear I shall have to run away to bed and leave my news unfinished if you persist in talking nonsense. Who was it said the other day he was never going to indulge in morbid thoughts again? And I have such a funny thing to tell you. Whom do you think I met to-night? You could never guess: so I shall tell you. ‘Little Tom Scarlett,’ rather bigger than ever."

"No!" says Dugdale, without meaning disbelief.

"Yes, indeed,"—laughing. "You know he is Lord Danvers now, and not a bit the worse of it. He came up to me, and quite took my breath away, his address was so rapid and incoherent. He was rather ill-tempered, I thought, just at first, and inclined to be bitter, until I turned away his anger with a soft answer. After that we made friends."

"I am very glad of it," says Dugdale, heartily. "Well?"

"Well, that was all. He took me down to my carriage, and said he should like to call and see you to-morrow. By which I understood the reconciliation was complete. You will see him, darling?"

"Of course I shall. Poor old Scarlett! I don't wonder he cut up rough at losing you. And you might have been Lady Danvers now had you listened to him, O most improvident of women!"

"I might,—and the most wretched of her sex too, O most stupid of men! Now good-night. You have been quite too long awake already, and I am only doing you an injury by remaining."

"Don't go yet. I told them to bring up some wine and some sandwiches for you, as I knew you would want something before going to bed. Do have a glass of wine here, and wait a few minutes. I am not in the least tired," entreats Kenneth, with all the eagerness of a boy. Whereupon Gretchen, who can refuse him nothing, re-seats herself, and settles down for another cosy *tête-à-tête*.

"But only for a moment or two, you dissipated boy," she says, patting his cheek tenderly. And then, lounging lazily in all the glory of her rich ball-gown, that brings out delicately the pale pink and cream of her complexion, she tells him all that has come and gone at Laura Redesdale's ball.

CHAPTER XXII.

"Well, he had
One golden hour—of triumph, shall I say?
Solace at least."—TENNYSON.

IF in her heart—spite of all that has passed—Fancy really expects Arthur to call next morning, she is disappointed. True to his word, he does not put in an appearance. Not, though she waits in for him for an hour beyond her usual time, and grows pale and irritable and full of a fear that will not be controlled.

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At half-past five she flings aside the book she has been pretending to read, and, ordering her carriage, goes to the Park,—more because it is the common haunt of men, and therefore Blunden may be there (though she would have scorned to confess to this motive), than from any strong love for that wearisome row, full of ill-built vehicles. Yet it is with a heart almost hopeful she visits Vanity Fair.

Hers is not a "hopeless hope;" there indeed she does see him,—long before he sees her,—though, to tell the truth, he has been wandering up and down for a good hour before the endless line of chairs, gazing at the slowly-passing carriages, in desperate expectation of seeing her, if only once again, before leaving Europe.

She comes presently, seated in the daintiest of phaetons, driven by the palest of pale-cream ponies, and with the most marvellous thing in tiny grooms behind her.

All the world is abroad. The sun, half mad with adulation, is flinging his portly person broadcast upon the earth ere he retires to rest. The weather, up to this, has been terrific, so every one is out and about to-day, and tries to think it is a charming thing to feel half roasted, because of the novelty of the sensation.

Mrs. Charteris's ponies, however, distinctly object to Apollo's tyranny, and presently grow restive. She has drawn up to the railings for a few minutes to "give and take" a little gossip with a delicious old colonel, who looks fit for nothing on earth but the British Museum,—when stuffed,—and, having said all the pretty things she knows to him in five minutes, and asked a thousand impossible questions about the Zulus, bows him off and prepares to start afresh. But the ponies decline to start afresh. During the late pause they have evidently been laying their heads together, and as a result have plainly agreed to a final outburst of spleen. Rising on their hind legs, they give their mistress to understand in a very emphatic manner that they will either run away or upset her, whichever suits her best. She has only to express a wish; it is quite the same to them, but a row they will have!

The matter is decided in two seconds. Before the tiny groom can descend to argue with them politely, but feebly,—only to get smashed for his pains,—Arthur Blunden has

cleared the railings, has seized the refractory little creatures' heads, and, by the power of a will superior to their own, has reduced them to order.

It is all over before Mrs. Charteris has time to do more than grow a little white, and wonder vaguely where Arthur could have sprung from. "Just like him, dear fellow! So like a novel, too! or a romance, or a poem by that charming 'Bab Ballads' man," etc.

"I shall see you home," says Arthur, sulkily, not looking at her, but preparing to enter the phaeton and take the reins. Now, Mrs. Charteris hates not to be looked at!

"It is kind of you, most kind," she says, coldly, "but I am sure I shall be able to manage them now by myself. Don't let me trouble you to come to Eaton Square. It is fearfully out of your way."

"I shall see you home," repeats he, doggedly.

"There is no necessity to."

"I think there is," coolly, and, flinging the pretty rug to one side, he seats himself beside her, reins in hand, and goes slowly up the drive.

"No one has ever before presumed to drive me without invitation," says Fancy, her eyes full of indignant tears.

"I'm not going to see you kill yourself under my eyes for the sake of a miserable bit of etiquette," returns he, calmly. "I told you to sell these hateful animals a month ago. I shall insist on you getting rid of them before—before I go abroad."

"I sha'n't sell them," says Fancy, with determination; and then, "When do you go abroad?"

"Next week, I hope."

"With what fervor"—bitterly—"you say that. Are you then so anxious to be gone? The East must have a strange attraction for you, and Afghanistan is of course your destination. It was most rash your risking your life as you did just now. Only consider,"—flippantly,—“had you made a false step you might never have seen Cabul.”

"I have seen it," replies he, quietly; "but that doesn't count. To-day I exerted myself to save the life that is most precious to me in all the world."

After this rebuke a silence falls upon them that lasts until they reach her door-steps.

"Come up," she says, peremptorily: "I have something I must return you;" and, thus admonished, he obeys her. Flinging the reins to the groom, he follows her up-stairs into the drawing-room.

"Here are your flowers," she says, pointing to a lovely mass of snowy blossoms, pure and precious, that lie on a table near. Without looking at them, she waves her hand reluctantly in their direction. By this gesture, simple, yet almost tragic, she insinuates that no earthly consideration could ever tempt her to touch them, to say nothing of enjoying them!

"I told you I should not accept them unless you brought them," she says, gravely. "Will you be so very kind as to take them away with you?"

"If you ring for one of your servants, I dare say they will rid you of them without further trouble," replies he, dejectedly.

"No,"—with deep emphasis: "they might keep them somewhere in the house."

"Then fling them out of the window."

"I couldn't bring myself to touch them," returns she, in a low but significant tone. Yesterday he would have laughed at this burst of childish anger on her part, to-day all is different; not even the most frugal of smiles betrays itself upon his lips. He is quite too far gone for that.

"Are you not going to say something?" asks Mrs. Charteris, severely, after a pause. "I quite thought you might wish to apologize about—about last night."

"Don't let us talk about last night," exclaims he, with a frown, and a sigh that is almost a groan. "Anything but that. It is bad enough to have to remember it forever; but to talk of it is beyond me."

"But I must talk of it,"—in an aggrieved tone. "How can I help it? It is nothing to you, of course. You don't even seem to feel regret for your conduct; but I cried straight through until this morning, and didn't sleep one wink."

"Well, you were not the only one who lay awake cursing fate."

He is not looking at her now. He has leaned his arm upon the mantel-piece, and is gazing into an imaginary fire beneath

him, where in reality can be seen nothing but a picturesque wilderness of ferns and flowers.

"I beg your pardon, I was not cursing anything!"—with dignified reproof. "I never do that sort of thing. I was only unhappy. To"—with a vivid blush—"to—kiss me without permission, it was horrible!"

He is silent.

"Are you not sorry you did it?" demands she, faintly surprised.

"No, I am not," returns he, calmly. "Not in the least. I am very glad I kissed you. It will be something to remember when everything else is lost."

"I think you ought to be ashamed of yourself," says Mrs. Charteris, in trembling tones. There is a suspicion of tears about the tone that rouses him and brings to the surface some small lingering signs of grace.

"Yes, yes, of course; I behaved abominably, no doubt. I beg your pardon," says poor Arthur, vaguely. "But surely there was some excuse. You should be the first to acknowledge that. And, besides,"—wearily,—“you may as well pardon me, as this is probably the last time I shall ever trouble you. I shall go abroad. I wish I had never returned home! I was happier in India than I shall ever be again, or ever have been.”

"Thank you,"—softly. "Then during these past few weeks—since you have known me—you have been wretched?"

"You know better than that. But the mad dream I encouraged then does not compensate me for the despair I feel to-day. However,"—turning to her with a melancholy assumption of cheerfulness,—“don't let me bore you any longer with my woes. Good-by,”—holding out his hand. "I shall go to the world's end and try to forget."

"You can't go there this instant," says Fancy, miserably.

"I can begin my preparations for my journey; why persuade me to remain? I cannot stay here when my heart is broken."

"Stay here and let me heal it," cries she, tremulously, going very close to him,—so close that her fair head almost touches his arm. "I—I am very sorry for all I said last night. I didn't mean it. I——" And here, for the first time for three years, Mrs. Charteris bursts into bitter tears.

"Fancy—Fancy," cries Arthur. And then he takes her in his arms, and holds her there against his heart, and there is a silence for many minutes, more eloquent than words.

And Fancy is perfectly happy, and cries to her heart's content in her lover's arms, and dries her eyes in her lover's handkerchief, and is altogether utterly satisfied.

Presently, however, the deluge ceases, and a smile, tenderer and sweeter than has ever before illuminated her lovely face, makes itself known.

"Those dear ponies," she says, patting Arthur's cheek with a little fond touch of approbation. "But for them we might never have had this explanation. So sweet of the dear things to run away. After all, Arthur, I don't think it would be nice to sell them, would it? It would seem ungrateful. But I shall never drive them again, never without you."

"I shall get you another pair, a thousand times prettier," says Arthur, "and we shall send those dear little scapegraces down to the country, to grow fat."

"Then I may keep them?"—with adorable humility.

"You are to have everything your own way, of course,"—with all the proper amount of imbecility.

"Am I?"—sweetly. "Then I know one thing I should like my own way. I should like"—with a swift upward glance—"our engagement to be kept quite secret. Shouldn't you?"

"I don't think I see the use of it," says Arthur, uncertainly.

"No, really?"—with a suspicious amount of surprise. "How strange of you! Don't you see how oppressive it would be to have one's friends and enemies congratulating one all over the place?"

"I don't," says Arthur, stupidly.

"Oh, well, I do," says Fancy, with increasing sweetness; "and so will you after a time. And you will promise me now"—coaxingly—"to let us have our little secret all to our own two selves, for just a little while? That will be delicious, will it not? All our own, with no one to share it with us, don't you see?"

Arthur is dazzled by this brilliant prospect. He laughs and kisses her, and victory is again her own.

"You won't tell your cousin, Sir John, or any one?" she says, a little anxiously.

"Why Sir John particularly?" asks he, quickly.

Fancy smiles, and then laughs outright. Her laugh is like music. It is a little running scale, sweetest as it reaches its summit.

"What! jealous already? And of such an old friend? How stupid!" she says, slipping her hand into his. "You mustn't, you know. But you know dear Sir John, don't you? He is quite a good fellow, all that, but if he hears anything in the morning, all the world knows it by noon."

Arthur is satisfied, nay, almost pleased. Has she not very nearly disparaged Sir John?

So he keeps their secret religiously, and the world is none the wiser; and people just shake their heads, and shrug their shoulders, and wonder how that pretty Mrs. Charteris does it, and count upon their fingers all the adorers she has had since the season began, terminating with Arthur Blunden. And they groan, and canvass the fresh victim, and tell each other they thought Blunden was too clever a man to be taken in by such an arch-coquette.

Kitty is a little angry about it, Arthur being an especial favorite of hers, and once or twice speaks of Fancy to him in a rather slighting fashion.

"I shouldn't have thought you would have liked her so much," she says to him, one evening.

"How do you know I do like her 'so much'?"

"I don't know, of course: you never speak of her. But one can see. One isn't blind. You are always with her; and that puzzles me. I didn't believe you could have cared for any one so frivolous."

"I don't think her frivolous. Gay and fond of amusement, perhaps, but not frivolous."

"No?"—with raised brows of disbelief. "You will not find many to agree with you."

"I think I could find a great many," replies he, coldly. Kitty notices the unfriendly tone, and, growing irritated, says more than otherwise might have passed her lips.

"If she is the charming character you represent her," she says, "I think she might be a little kinder to those orphan children left her so imprudently by her poor sister."

"I can hardly imagine her unkind to any one," says Arthur, keeping his temper admirably. "Surely you misjudge her, or else you do not know her. She has the tenderest heart of any woman I know."

And the discussion ends. Nevertheless, her words rankle in his breast, until a thousand times a day he finds himself wondering why it is he has never seen the little ones in question.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"All things rejoice in youth and love."—LONGFELLOW.

AT length,—hating this inward doubt of her he loves,—one day, sitting in her drawing-room, he says, abruptly,—

"And your little nieces,—are they well?"

In his tone there is something faintly unpleasant. She notices it, and smiles,—a little smile so quick as to be almost impalpable.

"Quite, thanks. By the by, you have never seen them. If I ring for them, are you sure it will not bore you? I should like you to know them."

"It will not bore me," says Arthur, who in reality adores children and is adored by them.

"They need only delay you a few minutes, and you can go to your club later on," says Fancy, with a slight shrug of apology, and, rising, rings the bell herself.

"Dyer, tell nurse Mr. Blunden wishes to see the children," she says, as her summons is answered.

"Yes, 'em."

"And, Dyer, say they are to come just as they are. Nurse is not to trouble about putting on fresh ribbons, or anything that way."

"Yes, 'em."

"You must not expect the children to be everything of the most desirable," says Fancy to Blunden as Dyer retires. She speaks with some hesitation, and lowers her eyes, to hide the gleam, half mocking, half malicious, that lurks within them.

"From being so much confined to their nursery, and seeing

so little of me, they are naturally reserved,—shy. I cannot account for the constraint that seems to overpower them when in my presence."

"Perhaps associating with them more frequently might have the desired effect of melting their reserve," suggests Arthur, gently.

"Do you think so? Perhaps you are right. At all events, I have prepared you, so you will not be surprised at any eccentricities in their behavior, that in other more pampered children might——"

At this moment a sound of pattering footsteps, the quick sweet treble of children's voices, a merry laugh, rings upon the ear. The door is flung wide very unceremoniously, and two children, almost angelic in their beauty, dressed in rich black velvet frocks and plain but snowy pinafores, rush into the room.

Pausing for a short moment to contemplate with grave eyes the stranger, they again continue their rush, and fling themselves bodily upon their aunt.

"Little vandals," cries she, laughing, "have you no proper sense of the fitness of things? Elsie, Blanche, let me introduce you to Mr. Blunden."

The children, advancing slowly, with all the calm trust of babyhood, present each (with a certain amount of condescension) a small hand to Arthur. Both, I regret to say, on this occasion, and on many others, give him the left hand,—Elsie, because her right one is tightly clasped over some invisible but doubtless valuable object, Blanche, because she evidently considers one hand equal in value to the other.

Blunden lifts Elsie upon his knee, whilst the elder, Blanche, goes back to cross-examine Mrs. Charteris.

"What did you bring us, Lally?" asks she, in a distinct tone.

"Myself: is not that sufficient?"

"But you said you would bring us sweeties,"—in an aggrieved tone.

"How can I always think of your sweeties? And you had sugared almonds yesterday. And you know how nurse scolds poor Lally when she brings you bonbons."

"But the almonds are all gone. Nurse had some,—though she says they are poison,—and Elsie and I stayed

awake for hours to see if she would die, and she didn't," says Miss Blanche, who plainly considers she has been done out of a good thing.

"That was very rude of nurse," says Mrs. Charteris, while Arthur laughs. "But surely that great box of almonds is not quite finished? If so, I shall feel it my duty to send for the doctor."

"Well, Mitchell had some besides nurse, and so had Dolly, and Crinkle" (the long-suffering cat), "and there is still"—with a seraphic smile—"one up-stairs keeping for you,—under my pillow! I slept on it, lest the fairies should steal it away."

"Sweetest! She never forgets her Lally," says Fancy, fondly kissing first the white blue-veined lids that hide the azure earnest eyes, and then the top of the golden head.

Meantime Blunden has succeeded in unfastening Elsie's pink little fist, in which lies a tiny china doll, in a most shameless state of nakedness. Elsie gives it to be understood that she is proud of this immodest doll, as she holds it up and flourishes it aloft with an unmistakable air of triumph.

"What is it?" demands Blunden, vaguely, feeling unequal to any cleverer remark, and adjusting his eyeglass carefully, as though preparing for another and closer examination of the treasure in question, while Mrs. Charteris looks on amused.

"My dolly! I have two more big ones, but this is my nicest. Nurse says she is a naughty dolly, and ought to have clothes on her, but I like her best this way, because I can wash her in my bath in the morning. Do you have a bath in the morning?"

"I do," says Arthur.

"And do you ever wash a dolly in it?"

"No," confesses Mr. Blunden, growing absolutely confused beneath the child's calm gaze. "I, you see, I haven't a dolly."

"I will give you one," says Blanche, who has crept nearer, and is evidently growing interested and in a degree sad, as she notices the stranger's apparent regret at not being the proud possessor of a "dolly." "I have three, and you shall have one of them. Mine are very pretty,—prettier than Elsie's,—and one of them floats! Did you ever see a floating one?"

Blunden confesses his ignorance.

"No? Then I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll lend you my floating one, if you'll promise to bring her back again to-morrow."

"It's awfully kind of you," says Arthur, overpowered by this generous offer. "But suppose I drowned your dolly, how would it be then? Mine is a much larger bath than yours, you know, and if she should lose her way in it, or her balance, and get killed, what would become of me? You might get me hanged for murder! At all events, I should be afraid to face you again."

"I know what you could do," says Miss Elsie, in her quaint little voice: "you could go straight to the toyshop and buy another lovely dolly and bring it here, and then Blanchie would forgive you. That's what you could do."

Here both Blunden and Mrs. Charteris laugh, and the children laugh too without knowing why, for mere fun's sake.

"Are you going to be our new uncle?" demanded Elsie, presently, after a pause spent in a minute examination of his watch-chain and seal. At this leading question Blunden colors vividly, so does Fancy, though she is certainly the least disconcerted of the two. She is in one of her wicked moods, and declines to come to the rescue.

"What?" says Mr. Blunden, because he has nothing else to say.

"Nurse says you are, and she never tells fibs," says Elsie, beating time to her words with many solemn nods. "I hope," scrutinizingly, "you aren't cross: we shall be dreadfully bad to you if you are. Lally is never cross, but Uncle George when he comes up from the country is horrid. Do you ever tell little girls they should be 'seen and not heard'?"

"Never."

"Do you think they ought to go to bed at seven o'clock?"

"Certainly not."

"Do you think"—waxing warmer with long-suppressed indignation—"we are like 'pitchers'?"

"No, indeed,"—somewhat puzzled.

"Or that our ears are long?"—pulling out her dear little shells of ears as far as they will go. "Because Uncle George says they are, and it is very rude of him."

"I begin to detest Uncle George," says Blunden, in so

heartily a tone that both the children adopt him as their own on the spot, and fall in love with him then and there.

"You are a pet," says Blanche, tenderly, and, standing on tiptoe, treats him to a wee bird-like kiss.

"I'm not so sure of that," returns he, gayly; "but I am sure of this, that I am your friend, and that I know we shall love each other by and by."

"Are you?" says Elsie, examining him curiously from her position on his knee; "then why didn't you bring us some lollipops?"

"I feel heartily ashamed of myself," says Blunden: "it never occurred to me; but it sha'n't happen again. To-morrow I shall retrieve my fault."

"I should like a new ball," says Blanche, dreamily.

"You shall have it. And you, Elsie?"

"I should like one too, and a whole lot of soldiers, and a big drum," says that modest infant.

"Send them the entire shop: it will save trouble," says Mrs. Charteris, with a faint move. "They are shy, are they not?"

"They are quite charming," replies he, hating himself as he remembers how he had allowed the silly gossip of a few women to disturb his mind: perhaps the thought that she has read his distrust of her is the worst of all. Turning to the children, he refuses to meet again Fancy's smiling but rather reproachful glance. "You shall have all you want," he says, kindly, "and unlimited bonbons."

"Oh, what a nice man you are!" says Elsie, rumpling her soft cheek against his, patronizingly: "I like you better than any one. You are the very nicest man I ever saw."

"How I wish every one thought like you!" says he, with a faint sigh, yet not daring to glance at Fancy.

"I do," says Blanche, sweetly, marking with all a child's quickness of perception the regretful note in his voice.

"With two such sweethearts I should indeed be ungrateful not to be content," responds he, "and happy too; yet I am not. I have harbored in my mind, almost unconsciously, the shadow of an unkind thought towards an angel, and I cannot be happy until she pardons me."

"Angels are always forgiving," says Mrs. Charteris, in so sweet a tone that Blunden takes courage, and looks at her

imploringly. Her aspect is sunny, and presently the imploring glance becomes sentimental, and might have blossomed into one altogether adoring, but for Elsie, who, breaking in abruptly on his meditations, puts all sentiment to flight by giving him a sound pinch.

"Don't look like that," she says,—*"such a silly smile. You're just like Joey in the pantomime, or the circus. Did you ever see Joey? Speak to us, and tell us something."*

"Whom do you love best in the world?" asks Arthur, at his wit's end for conversation.

"Crinkle," returns Blanche, promptly. This is the much bruised and abused cat.

"And after?"

"My black doll, Miss Dido."

"And then?"

"Lally."

"You see how alienated is their affection," says Fancy, maliciously. "I must be content to take rank after Crinkle and a black doll. Children, come here."

They run to her, and fling themselves all over her, to the extreme detriment of her dainty Parisian costume.

"Go to nurse now," she says: "you have been here long enough."

"Long enough!"—indignantly. "Not one minute! I haven't been in this room for a whole day, and I haven't looked at all the pretty things yet."

"I think it is very greedy of you to send us away so soon," says little Elsie, glancing out from her shining hair like a small Skye-terrier.

"Am I not to be obeyed? What! not a stir! You see, Arthur, I am not severe enough even yet; I do not beat them enough, or surely they would do as I bid them. I can get nothing done without bribery and corruption, as, for instance—Children," laying a gentle, loving hand on each small shoulder, "listen to me. Down in the hall, upon a chair, is a box with a lovely picture on it, filled with—guess what?"

"Choc'lits!" exclaim both the trebles at once.

"No,—French bonbons of all sorts." But hardly has the word escaped her when, like a summer tempest, the two fly from the room, and down the stairs, where they are seized

by the nurse, and, having secured the desired prize, are borne off captive to the nurseries.

"It is sad to see them so depressed, poor little souls, isn't it?" says Fancy, when the last scamper has ceased. "They are desperately afraid of me, are they not?"

"I have wronged you," returns he, with contrition.

"Never mind,"—giving him her hand: "I do not blame you in the matter. You have been listening to many unpleasant hints, I dare say. Had I been a stupider woman I should have been 'done to death by slanderous tongues' long ago. And now let me explain. I certainly do not take them to drive with me in the Park, because they simply detest it; and I do not tell every woman I meet how they got through the measles and the whooping-cough, because I am not a bore. And I do not have them in the drawing-room when people are here, to listen to foolish gossip, because I think it bad for them. But I do love them, and they, I know, love me; and I think they are as healthy and as happy as Lady Loo Daventry's children, who are always to be seen with her in public."

"They ought to be the happiest children I know," says Arthur, earnestly.

"No,"—with a faint smile. "Don't flatter me, now. Do you know it is the one thing that annoys me, the belief that I could be neglectful of poor Alley's children? I am not so devoted as their mother might be, I suppose, but I could not do without them now. I certainly don't spend all my days in the nursery, but I see them constantly, and sometimes I take tea with them in their own rooms, and I always get a last peep at them, however late, before going to bed. They are very pretty in bed," says Fancy, in a low soft tone, half absent, as though now while speaking she can see them wrap in slumber. "When they lie sleeping, with their faces flushed, their hair flung over their pillows, and their little arms thrown in sweet abandon above their heads, forgive me if I say I think they are the prettiest children in the world."

She hardly knows how more than pretty she herself is looking now, as she stands before him with that tender, half-proud expression on her face. To him alone has she revealed her inner and truer nature. This he fully understands, and the knowledge moves him deeply.

"I wish I could find words to tell you all I think of you," he says, with intense earnestness.

She laughs, and her new mood vanishes, and she is once more gay and *débonnaire* as usual; but he can never again forget what he has seen, and her altered demeanor does not check his admiration in the least.

"Perhaps, if you could," she says, lightly, "or if you dared, I should hear more than would please me, and should be at daggers drawn with you for the rest of my natural life."

CHAPTER XXIV.

VAL. "How like a dream is this I see and hear!
Love, lend me patience to forbear a while."

SILVIO. "O! miserable, unhappy that I am!"

Two Gentlemen of Verona.

It is a dull day, gray and sullen, yet full of a treacherous heat,—so heavy a day that the very summer wind is subdued. Not a sigh escapes it, no faintest breeze disturbs the unnatural calm of the atmosphere. Above in the clouds the giant Thunder is preparing his grand artillery, and, crouching overhead, surveys the trembling earth with a grim smile.

Every one is languid, and indisposed for work of any kind, and keeps looking round for cosy chairs and pleasant novels, over which to sleep away the dragging hours. The very *gamins* in the streets cease to find unholy joy in flinging themselves beneath the wheels of passing cabs, and know no longer rapture in an ear-piercing yell.

Sir John Blunden, half in and half out of the drawing-room window, with one foot resting on the balcony,—that is fragrant with drooping flowers,—is yawning tranquilly three times in every minute. Kitty, inside, is trying to deceive herself into the belief that she is doing crewel-work, but in reality wondering whether she can summon up enough energy to order the carriage and put on her things and go to spend an hour or two with Gretchen.

"I'm dining at Richmond this evening," says Sir John,

presently, having overdone the yawning until he has become almost wakeful.

"Are you?" returns Kitty, growing herself wakeful on the spot. "With whom?"

"Lady Cyclamen, and Mrs. Charteris, and Landor, and some other fellows; Laura Redesdale, too, I think, and another woman, whose name I forget."

"Ah!" says Kitty, in a difficult tone. Feeling her color rise, she turns her head and examines with affected interest the basket of silks beside her.

"Bore,—rather," says Sir John. "Too hot a day to be energetic or conversational, or that."

"Then why go, if it is unpleasant to you?"—with just the faintest suspicion of a sneer.

"When a fellow promises, you know, it looks badly dropping out of it afterwards. And when she asked me I hadn't an excuse ready."

"When—who asked you?"

"Fancy Charteris."

"So I imagined. You are almost necessary to her, it seems to me. Are you to be her special property this evening?"

"No such luck," says Sir John, whose want of observation is quite unique. "I'm safe to be given over to the tender mercies of that other woman, who will, no doubt, expect me to converse straight through dinner. What a jolly sell she'll get!"

"Is Arthur to be one of the party?"

"No. I thought you knew he was out of town; went some days ago to see about that place of young Norcott's. Something has gone wrong with something, and Arthur, being a trustee, must look it up. He does a good deal of looking up for other people. I really think he likes it."

"Why was not I asked?" says Kitty at this moment, raising her eyes, and speaking very slowly.

"My dear child, you seem to forget it is barely a fortnight ago since you refused with scorn to dine at Richmond."

"Not to dine at Richmond. With Mrs. Charteris."

"Quite the same thing, only worse, as it seems to me. If you are going to refuse to dine at every place where Mrs. Charteris is invited, you will shun half the houses in town. Be sensible, Kitty. Let us suppose an extreme case. If

their Royal Highnesses were to honor us with an invitation to dinner, Mrs. Charteris being one of the guests, would you refuse it?"

"It is indeed an extreme case. The Prince would not dine with Mrs. Charteris,"—scornfully.

"No. He might perhaps dine with worse,"—with an amused laugh that jars on Kitty.

"He might certainly dine with better," she says, bitterly.

"He certainly might,"—with undiminished good humor,—"with you, for example. Well, I must be off. I must see Danvers at the club; and afterwards——"

"And you knew of all this for a whole day, and never told me until now!" says Kitty, with lowered head and fingers that trifle nervously with a paper-knife lying on the gypsy-table near her.

"I knew of it for two days," says the irrepressible Sir John, "and never thought of it until this morning. I should probably have forgotten it altogether had not I met Mrs. Charteris in the Park."

"You met her to-day?"

"Twice. Once in the Park, in the morning (by the by, what a pretty chestnut that is she rides! I must get one like it for you), and later on, driving. She pulled up, and took me as far as Tattersall's."

"I dare say. She is the most obliging woman I know,—and the fastest. She is—to say the least of it—wretched form."

"My dear Kitty, don't begin," says Sir John, with a glance of exaggerated horror. "We all know that when 'women's thoughts about women' are spoken they are calculated to make one's hair stand on end. You are awfully down on that poor little woman. I wonder why?"

"I shall not say another disparaging word of her, as it distresses you so much," says Kitty, pale but quiet.

"She never harmed you in any way."

"No,—never." As she speaks she rises, with a book in her hand, and moves towards the door.

"Kitty——" says Jack, quickly.

"Well?"—coldly, glancing back from the doorway.

"I shall be away all the evening. I want to say good-by to you."

"Good-by," returns she, icily, and, going out, closes the door firmly behind her.

A minute or two later Sir John opens it again, and goes down the stairs and into the street, whistling gayly. He wonders a little "what's up with Kitty?"—his usual inward interrogation,—and then decides she has some small grudge against Fancy Charteris, some jealousy about clothes, or a fancied slight, or a very superior bonnet,—“women are so odd,”—and then dismisses the whole question from his mind with the comforting reflection that “everything falls into line in time,” and, meeting Danvers, goes on his way rejoicing.

Meantime, Kitty, to whose heart his careless departure has given more pain than she would willingly acknowledge even to herself, having flung, with some impatience, the book she carried up-stairs to the other end of her bedroom,—as though it, poor innocent fledgling of some youthful brain, had been the primary cause of all her discomfort,—dresses herself, and, filled with a curious fancy that it may be possible to cheat grief, goes, not to Gretchen, but to the Park.

It is almost empty. But as she drives onwards she meets Cyclamen, to her surprise, with little Olive beside her.

Beckoning to her, she draws up, and says, with a most successful smile and in a charmingly indifferent tone, that doesn't deceive her friend in the least,—

“You will be late for your Richmond dinner.”

“I am not going. No; some one told me yesterday the day would be unpleasant, so I wrote a little note to Mrs. Charteris explaining all things. I do so hate rain and confusion of all kinds. I am positive we shall have a thunderstorm before the evening is past. You are not going?”

“No. I knew nothing of it until to-day,” says Kitty, calmly, who is too proud to dissemble. “Laura is going.”

“I think not. Only Fancy and Lady Inman. It will be a failure, I shouldn't wonder.”

“Ah!” says Kitty; and then she smiles again, and nods gayly, and says something pretty to the small pensive child, who sits, like a frail shadow of her mother, on the right hand, and passes on with a calm face, but a breast too troubled for expression to give relief. She is not the one to find consolation at any time in words,—rather a deeper sense of degradation and a quick desire to kill whomsoever may

be rash enough to condemn the faulty but still beloved one. She may condemn, yet cannot hate. With Kitty to love once is to love always. And is it not so with all true affection? Can time, or distance, or disappointment destroy it?

So she goes homeward full of bitter thoughts. Cyclamen not going, nor Laura. Then Mrs. Charteris is going there virtually alone, for Lady Inman doesn't count: she is as stupid as her husband, and he is the dullest man alive. Could Jack have known all this and suppressed it? The thought is agony, and for that reason she hugs it, and dwells upon it, and tortures herself with it, until finally she brings herself to believe her husband has purposely lied to her and hidden from her what he deemed it expedient she should not know. When jealousy, which is the meanest and most demoralizing of all sentiments, enters the brain, it ejects every other godlier feeling, and, engendering madness in those it holds in bondage, eventually compels them to servitude and vileness of many kinds.

So Kitty suffers, the more cruelly that she endures in secret; while Sir John goes down to Richmond and enjoys his evening straight through without blemish from start to finish. He also enjoys a mild, a very mild, flirtation with Mrs. Charteris, that in no wise undermines the real and lasting admiration he entertains for his wife. He eats an uncommonly good dinner, finds pleasure in his dry champagne and joy in several very excellent cigars, and tells himself lazily later on that he has "been having a real good time."

And Kitty, in her own room,—having refused dinner under plea of headache,—is crying her lovely eyes almost blind, and wearing out her bedroom carpet in a vain endeavor to walk down the passionate doubt and suspicion that are consuming her. Where is he now? What doing? Sitting beside her, perhaps (with a slight clenching of the small white hand), looking into her eyes, returning with interest her coquettish glances,—designing rather than coquettish,—holding her hand, it may be. Oh, no, no! Jack would not, could not do that! It is too much. It is impossible. He cannot altogether forget how he once loved the poor girl who truly loves him,—his own wife! How late it is! Eleven. If anything should have happened to him! He is such a reckless fellow. With a wild pang of anguish she remembers how

she refused him that last caress he asked for when parting,—she closed the door upon his entreaty. How could she have been so uncalled, so unloving? No wonder he has flown to others for——

A step upon the stairs, "Nancy Lee" whistled very airily and vigorously in a voice sweet and true, and Kitty, oblivious of her fears a moment since, freezes again.

"I say, Kitty, are you awake?" says Jack, knocking gently at her door as a clock in the distance chimes twelve; then, emboldened by the light that comes to him through the chink of the door, he goes on louder: "It was no end of fun. Let me in, and I'll tell you all the news. You would have enjoyed it tremendously, spite of your prejudice."

"I dare say,"—slowly. "But I am tired now. I cannot be disturbed. You can tell me all about it to-morrow."

"All right," says Jack, somewhat affronted at her tone, and, going into his dressing-room, tells himself some people are cold and don't care for other people who care for them as they ought to care.

Which speech, though hardly graceful, satisfies him, which is, of course, everything.

CHAPTER XXV.

"And to be wroth with one we love
Doth work like madness in the brain."

COLERIDGE.

JUST two hours before this, in Richmond, the storm so long expected has broken forth in all its fury. Great flashes of blinding lightning intermingled with the grand roar of the thunder from on high; while ever and anon the passionate bursts of rain flung themselves against the window-panes of the hotel, almost drowning the gay laughter and merry voices of those within, where Blunden and Fancy Charteris and Laura Redesdale (who had gone down there at the last moment, having been persuaded thereto by Fancy and all the others) were holding high revelry.

But when the hour for departure came, and the storm still raged, all the gentler members of the party declined to brave the elements; and indeed driving was found to be utterly out of the question: so Sir John and Fancy and Laura Redesdale started together to catch the train, while Lady Inman and her husband, and two or three others, threw in their lot together and remained at the hotel until the following day.

Now, as it so happened, Arthur Blunden came up to town that night by the same train, being unwilling to spend another hour outside the place that held his heart's idol; and as he stepped from his carriage on his arrival at the station he saw, walking just before him, two figures, both so familiar, and one so bound up with every fondest thought of his heart, that he stopped short to contemplate them more at his leisure.

As he stared, unwilling to believe his own eyes, a merry sweet infectious laugh rang upon the air,—a laugh he knew well—alas! too well—one that he had often echoed through very sympathy with its mirth, but that now falling on his ears made him shrink and pale, and brought his teeth down sharply on his under lip.

The possessor of the gay laugh is Fancy; her companion is Sir John Blunden. Laura Redesdale, who has run on before to her carriage (having telegraphed for it), is out of sight: so that Arthur, knowing nothing of that dinner at Richmond, sees only the woman he loves alone at eleven o'clock at night with the man he has long deemed his rival, and, with a brain on fire and a heart desolate, tells himself with a desperate sense of certainty that surely she is false to him and inconstant beyond belief.

He makes a step forward, as though suddenly filled with a mad desire to reach her, to take her from his cousin, and declare aloud his engagement to her, her perjury, and his own infatuation in believing in one so treacherous, so lost to all sense of truth and honor. Then the sickening knowledge that all the interference and all the loud talking in the world cannot alter facts checks him, and, turning abruptly aside, he strides away in a contrary direction, deaf to the suave exhortations of longing cabbies, neither knowing nor caring whither his feet may take him.

Fortunately, they take him home, an hour or so after Sir

John has knocked and been refused admission by Kitty, and long after the fair little cause of all his grief has laid her yellow head upon her pillow and sunk sweetly into blissful slumbers, innocent of warning dreams.

Flinging himself undressed upon his bed, he fights with his grief and desperate disappointment until morning breaks and the "sun begins to gild the eastern sky."

The early day passes slowly; but with the afternoon comes a resolution to seek Fancy, to upbraid her to her face, to accuse her of her sin, and, having thrown up his engagement with her, quit England forever.

Arriving at her door he is, perhaps, a trifle embarrassed at hearing she is within; but, following the man up-stairs, with grim determination on his brow, he is ushered into the cosy boudoir, so dear to him in happier hours, where Fancy reigns queen.

Her majesty is quite alone at this inauspicious moment, clad in a ravishing gown that makes her look, if possible, more desirable than usual. Rising gladly as he enters, she comes forward to greet him, with a lovely smile upon her lips, that somehow fades and dies as her eyes meet his.

He is looking worn and haggard, as one who has not slept for many nights; and there is an ill-disguised air of sternness and misery about him that makes itself felt.

"My dear Arthur," she says, "has anything happened? I do hope you have not been unsuccessful in your mission and ruined that poor Norcott boy?"

"No. It will take a woman to do that later on."

"What a tone! Something has gone wrong, of course. You look as if you had seen a ghost. Have you?"—with a little nervous laugh.

"I wish I could believe I had," he says, with sudden passion, pushing her hand off his arm. "No, it was you I saw last night,—you,—alone with John Blunden at eleven o'clock."

She changes color, and an indescribable expression comes into her eyes. She moves away from him, and in her withdrawal from his side there is a suspicion of scorn, and surprise, and indignation.

"Oh! is that all?" she says, coldly. "You quite frightened me. I feared some misfortune had befallen you."

"You feared what is the truth. What greater misfortune can befall a man than to find the woman he loves untrue?"

"You will, perhaps, explain yourself," she says, pale but calm.

"At least you do not attempt to deny the fact of your being there," he goes on, not heeding her.

"I see no reason why I should deny anything; and, even if I did, at least I should not lie about it, as you seem to politely hint might be possible to me."

"Denial in this case would be useless," goes on he, recklessly, hardly knowing what he says, but stung to madness by her seeming indifference. He is very pale and much distressed. Perhaps a silly hope that she might be able to prove an *alibi* has sustained him; but now such hope is over,—she has not attempted a defence,—and the sight of his pretty *château* lying in utter and unpicturesque ruins at his feet crushes him. "Had I heard it of you," he says, slowly, "I should have scorned to believe it; but I saw you and him with my own eyes."

"No doubt," returns she, with a disdainful shrug: "I should think we were quite visible to the naked eye."

"What were you doing at that hour?"

"I decline to answer you when you address me in that tone."

"No, because you are ashamed to answer."

"What a base thought!"—with a curl of her lip.

"Base!"

"Well, not treble, certainly: it is quite too low for that," returns she, flippantly, though in reality her heart is beating almost to suffocation and she is passionately angry.

"I insist upon an answer to my question," exclaims he, vehemently, stung by her apparent frivolity at a moment so fraught with anguish for him.

"By what right do you insist?"

"By the right of our engagement."

"Then your right no longer exists. Our engagement is ended,—over. I will not be bound to any man who could distrust me as you do."

"You are indeed in a hurry to break your chains," says he, in a low tone.

"I am. Why should I subject myself to this kind of thing? I am not accustomed to it."

"Have I accused you of anything but the truth? Were you not alone with Sir John at an hour when, when— And now you decline to say where you were, or why you were with him. And when you knew I had so often objected to your intimacy with him."

"Pray do not let us pursue the subject," says Mrs. Charteris, haughtily. "Too much has been said already."

"Am I to understand that for the future we meet as strangers?" demands he, hotly.

"As you will, of course,"—quietly. "Indeed, I think it a very wise suggestion. Remember, however, it emanates from you. You are the hurried one this time, not I. I should be glad, too, if you would try to understand something else. That I wish——"

A pause.

"Yes?" from Arthur.

"You would go away! I am quite tired of it all."

"You shall be obeyed," says Arthur, very grandly; and, taking up his hat, he moves towards the door and takes his departure.

Meantime, Kitty, who is still sore at heart, has successfully eluded her husband throughout the day, much to that careless man's bewilderment. Feigning headache in the morning, she escapes breakfast, and is dead to all the tender messages of condolence conveyed to her through her maid. Yet withal she suffers more from this self-enforced severance than he does, and grows sadder if not wiser as the hours pass without bringing about a reconciliation.

About four a longing to see some one of whose affection she may count herself assured induces her to drive to Gretchen's, where she finds Kenneth on a sofa, with "little Tom Scarlett" and two or three other men around him, laughing and talking as he has not done for many a day. Gretchen at a distance—looking sweeter and more girlish than ever—is pouring out tea, and making much of Dandy, who has just come off second best in a wordy war with Brandy, who is also present.

"My dear girl, how glad I am you have come! I hardly hoped to see you to-day,—I don't know why," Gretchen says, flushing with unmistakable pleasure, as Kitty, tall and stately, sweeps up the pretty room.

"Neither do I," returns Kitty, laughing, "considering I generally find my way here five days out of the week. I always say"—sinking into a chair, with a little sigh that has something in it resembling envy—"this is the pleasantest house in town."

"You are going to the opera to-night, are you not, Kitty?" asks Kenneth, presently, from his sofa.

"Yes, dear."

"Make Gretchen go with you. She wants to hear Tassalle, and won't go by herself."

"Why not come to our box?" says Kitty, persuasively, turning to her sister. "Brandy will bring you, and I myself will see you home with—with Jack."

"May I count on you, Brandy?" asks Gretchen, addressing that ingenuous youth, who is standing in one of the windows, apparently lost in thought, though in reality he is only meditating on some final remark that shall help to smash beyond all recognition his quondam friend.

"I should be charmed, my dear, but I really am not at liberty," he says, being under the delusion that Mrs. Charteris is to be present to-night at a "small and early" given in Berkeley Square; whereas she has refused that invitation, and is going to the opera, and nowhere else, later on. "Please don't compel me, Gretchen. I would do anything to oblige you,—really anything, from playing pitch-and-toss up to manslaughter, if it would afford you the smallest gratification; but I confess the opera to-night is out of my reach."

Gretchen shrugs her shoulders.

"Then will you take me, Dandy?" she says, turning to Mr. Dinmont.

"Thanks awfully," replies he, speaking with unconcealed alacrity. "It is very good of you to have me. I hate my own society; and I was bound to put in an appearance at the Italian house to-night."

"I didn't know you were going," says Brandy, with sudden suspicion, trying to examine his friend's infantile features. Dandy has also had an invitation to that dance in Berkeley Square. Why is he not going? He may be going later on, certainly; but it is unlike the careful Dinmont to be late on the field. "You said nothing of it."

"No?"—innocently, but maliciously. "I don't care about

those Stanleys, so I sha'n't go to the Square; and, besides, yesterday Mrs. Charteris made rather a point of seeing me at the opera to-night,—has a commission or something for me to execute, and asked me to come to her box some time during the evening, that she might tell me about it."

"Ah!" says Brandy. For an instant he suffers defeat,—only for an instant; then he rallies and comes to the front boldly.

Going up to Gretchen, he leans over her chair, and pushes back tenderly a little bit of her pretty hair behind her ears.

"Though I have behaved badly to you, Meg," he says, caressingly, "will you do something for me?"

"It depends upon what it is," replies Meg, with a sweet smile.

"Will you forget what I said just now, and let me take you to the opera?"

"But Dandy has promised to take care of me; and, besides, I thought you said you had a pressing engagement that prevented your escorting your poor little sister. How is that, Master Brandy?"

"It is the simplest thing in the world," says Mr. Tremaine, unabashed: "I have changed my mind. The fact is, Mrs. Charteris gave me a fan to get mended for her, and, as I believed she would be at the Stanleys' to-night, I meant to go there to return it to her; but (as Dinmont has kindly informed me) she is going to the opera. I should like to go there too."

"How flattering!" says Gretchen, laughing. "It seems to be all Mrs. Charteris. I wonder in what part of the play I make my appearance? However, I am not greedy, nor do I bear malice. You shall both escort me, if you will."

"There is safety in a multitude," says Kenneth.

"It depends upon the kind of rabble," says Kitty. "I think it rather rash your trusting yourself alone to two such incompetent people. Why, they can't even take care of themselves,"—giving Brandy's ear a little pinch.

"Better accept me as a guard of honor," says Danvers. "Never court danger if you can decently avoid it."

"No,—thanks: I shall keep to my bargain. I am sure 'our boys' will behave very prettily to me," returns Gretchen, smiling.

"I accept defeat," says Danvers, falling back again upon Kenneth; and, Gretchen crossing the room to a distant davenport to show Kitty some important missive received from their mother that morning, Brandy and Dandy find themselves virtually alone.

Brandy hastens to break the dismal silence consequent on Gretchen's retreat.

"What was that you said just now," he asks, with unconcealed scorn and a tendency towards gibing in his tone, "about Mrs. Charteris and her making a point of seeing you to-night? I like that."

"I'm glad you do. It speaks well for you. Truth is so seldom palatable," retorts Mr. Dinmont, with a maddening smile.

"At times, as it seems to me, your absurd infatuation for Mrs. Charteris rather leads you astray,—makes your intellect totter on its throne. Frail things as a rule do totter," says Tremaine, with a short laugh. "I'd propose to her if I were you."

"So I shall, the first available opportunity,"—with immovable calm.

"You've pluck, but I doubt her giving you that available opportunity."

"Then I shall make one for myself,"—stoutly.

"Then so shall I," declares Brandy, in a furious though suppressed tone, now thoroughly incensed. "Yes, I suppose I have as good a chance as you have. You never knew her until I introduced you; and as I" (heavily accentuated) "am not the one to do things in an underhand fashion, I tell you I too shall propose to her as soon as occasion offers, and so I warn you."

"Warn me, sir! What do you mean? Do you imagine I fear you as a rival? I beg you will try to master the fact that I fear no man,—you least of all,"—with withering contempt. "You can propose to her, or to the Princess Beatrice, or to any one else your madness suggests, with, I should say, quite the same result in all cases."

"You mean Mrs. Charteris will refuse me,—struck by your superior charms, no doubt? I flatter myself I'm better-looking than you, anyway."

"You may be,"—with imperturbable *nonchalance*,—"and

better bred your manners prove you ! But you're not richer ; and money makes the man, according to Byron."

"The Tremaine property is as good as the Dinmonts' any day,"—with intense disgust. "You can do as you like, however. A refusal will be good for you, and take you down a bit."

"I shall thank you not to address me again on any subject," says Dandy, with sudden wrath.

Brandy laughs sardonically.

"It isn't a friendly act," he says, "to sit silent and watch a fellow make an ass of himself without uttering a word of expostulation."

At this Dandy exhibits his best sneer.

"Your affecting concern for my welfare touches me deeply," he is beginning, when a movement among the other occupants of the room checks him. Indeed, it is impossible to imagine where this charming discussion might not have led the belligerents did not Kitty, coming up at this point, say good-by to Dinmont and carry Brandy away with her.

One by one the others too depart, and evening falls very silently, and the lamps are lit in the square outside, and the cries of the vendors grow less, and the music of the wheels grows louder, and people hurry madly to and fro, as though the last moment for action has indeed come.

Not a breeze rustles. The air is full of a languid sultriness. It is indeed an ideal summer's evening, so mild, so calm, that instinctively one's thoughts wander and travel from the gaudy sinful city to the vast sweet country, where tender winds are blowing, and blossoms sleeping, and young buds breaking forth, and where, later on, fair

"Phœbe will behold
Her silver visage in the wat'ry glass,
Decking with liquid pearl the bladed grass."

Gretchen, standing at the window, looking down upon the pavements and the flickering jets of gas, and humming softly to herself, marks a little child standing half bare and wholly lonely against a lamp-post. Hunger sits upon his brow ; and want, and worse than want, have made hollows in the cheeks that should be rounded and flushed with childish grace and beauty.

"How absorbed you are!" says Kenneth, from his sofa.

"Yes. I am watching a little boy,—such a pretty child, but so thin and miserable, poor little fellow. I wonder where his mother is? See! he is looking up. Oh! I must give him something,"—turning impulsively to the door, as though bent on embracing the picturesque *gamin* then and there.

"Tell Jacobs to give him something, darling, and don't worry yourself," says Kenneth.

"I don't think servants give things nicely: do you, Ken?" asks she, wistfully. "And he is such a pretty boy. No, I shall run down and see to him myself."

So she runs out of the room, and, I dare say, makes that boy blissfully happy for an hour or so, and presently returns, bringing Jack Blunden in her train, who has looked in idly on his way home, almost hoping to find Kitty here. He is more upset about this quarrel with his wife than he is himself quite aware of, and he is in unmistakably low spirits.

"Ah, Blunden," says Kenneth, who likes Jack better than most people, "what lucky wind has blown you here this evening?"

"A desire to see you both, Gretchen especially. She is the one restful thing, I think, in all this great Babylon,—the one green spot in the wilderness."

"My dear Ken, if you allow this sort of thing to go on you will be the sufferer," says Gretchen, laughing. "I shall become arrogant and overbearing, and all my amiability—now so much admired—will die a natural death. Kitty was here, Jack, about an hour ago. Did you know?"

"No; I haven't seen her for some hours," returns Sir John, in a constrained and rather bored tone. "She is going to hear Patti to-night."

"And you? You are going?"

"I'm not sure. Kitty said something about going to the Stanleys' afterwards, and I hate that kind of affair, and Mrs. Stanley in particular. I can't endure gushing women, and I like a little moderation in the use of rouge. The fact is, Mrs. Stanley and I don't love each other 'dear.' Are you going?"

"No."

"Not even to the opera?"

"Yes, I shall go there, certainly," says Gretchen, who is

playing a symphony, with variations,—many variations,—on her husband's head.

Thinking she is going to her own box, he says nothing more on this subject, but passes on to another.

"I shall never forget the astonishment I felt to-night," he says, smiling. "Fancy walking up to any respectable house and finding the mistress of it indulging in a lengthened and apparently cheerful conversation with a very filthy little boy, who couldn't understand a word she was saying, because she was unable to speak his native language, which is slang!"

"He was a very lovely boy," says Gretchen.

"Was he really? Are you prepared to swear to that?"

"Quite prepared."

"My dear child, how did you see him? I interviewed him closely even through my glass, and failed to see anything but a faint outline and unlimited soot. No doubt, however, he is just the sort of *protégé* to do one credit,—until he steals the silver spoons."

"You never told me, my Lady Bountiful, how you got on with your ragged urchin," says Kenneth. "He didn't bite?"

"Nonsense! He was the dearest boy. And so grateful! I told him he should have his breakfast here every morning, and I made him promise to come and tell me whenever he is hungry."

"Ah!" says Sir John, mildly. "You didn't order a camp-stool for him on the door-step, did you? Because I should rather fancy, after your noble offer of assistance, it is there he will take his 'lonely stand' for the term of his natural existence. You're in awful luck to get a pretty boy; it will be so much more ornamental than an ugly one."

"Poor Kitty!" says Gretchen, making a little grimace; "I can't help pitying her when I think what a goose she has married."

But at the mention of his wife's name Sir John grows grave again and goes back to commonplace subjects.

"Do you still like that new man,—Blunt?" he asks, turning to Dugdale.

"Very much," Gretchen returns, eagerly, answering for Kenneth. "He is so gentle, and, I am sure, clever. When I see him I believe in him, he looks so strong, so able. And then there is that last successful case of his,—Letty Nor-

man's brother. He was considered almost hopeless, and is now nearly well. And Ken is much better. Are you not, Ken?"

"Yes, I really think I am," says Kenneth, who would have said just the same to please her were it the blackest untruth. "And really Norman's case, you know, was one in a thousand."

"One likes to hear that," says Blunden, heartily. "Hearing of a new man, one likes to know something positive about his genius before going into ecstasies over him. You have faith in him yourself?"

"Well, yes, I think so."

"That's right; that's half the battle,"—cheerfully. "I always think, you know, one ought to believe in a fellow when he is doing all he can for one. It's only decently grateful, you know. And really you are looking better. I suppose the change from the country to this pure air——"

"That will do; you may draw the line there," says Kenneth, laughing; and Jack rises to go.

"So glad we shall see you to-night," he says to Gretchen. "Kitty"—with a slightly dejected air—"is never so happy with any one as with you."

"What a modest speech!" says Gretchen. "'Except myself,' you ought to have added."

"Well, I'm not sure, do you know?" says Jack, simply, almost wistfully; and then he bids them good-by and goes home to his dinner.

CHAPTER XXVI.

DON CAR. "Pray, who was there?"

LARA. "Why, all the town and Court;
The house was crowded: and the busy fans
Among the gayly-dressed and perfumed ladies
Fluttered like butterflies among the flowers."

Spanish Student.

As dinner-hour approaches, Kitty relents. A sort of tender coquetry induces her to put on her prettiest gown—the gown in which he has so often admired her—and to trick

herself out in all the little fineries and innocent gewgaws he has at various periods spoken kindly of.

She goes down to dinner, and, though still constrained in manner, in spite of herself is almost happy in that she can see him, and be near him, and hear his voice again.

After dinner, passing through the hall, she sees on a table in an anteroom, near the drawing-room, a lovely bouquet lying, frail pink blossoms, and little dainty buds that peep out knowingly, as though to claim a kiss or at least a caressing touch.

"Dear Jack! After all, he is grieved at this horrid coldness between us! And he has brought these charming flowers to help to make friends. How sweet of him!"

Not to be outdone in generosity, she takes up the fragrant bouquet, and returning to the dining-room, to where Jack is standing, reading the evening paper, she says, softly, yet with some hesitation born of the late estrangement,—

"I like my flowers so much. Pink is such a favorite color with——"

"Pink!" says Jack, laying down the paper. "Those flowers are not for you. I know you prefer white to any. I sent yours up-stairs to your room an hour ago."

"Not mine!" says Kitty, paling. "Whose, then?"

"They are for Mrs. Charteris. I made a bet with her last night, and lost. My payment was to be made in these pink blossoms."

"Never!" says Kitty, passionately; and, flinging the flowers upon the ground, she places one small foot upon them and tramples them out of all beauty.

"You are mad!" says her husband, laying his hand upon her arm. But it is too late: the charm of the flowers is ruined and lost forever. "I have a great mind to make you pick them up again," he says, slowly, with a look in his usually gentle eyes she has never seen there before. A moment's reflection would have prevented his making this speech, which is both ill advised and unworthy of him.

"Do not go too far," says Kitty, with a little pale smile of defiance. "I am not your slave. What! was it not enough that you should spend all last evening alone with her (I learned from Cyclamen that neither she nor Laura was to be present); that you should haunt every place you

think it likely she may be at: but that now—now—when I am most unhappy, you should——” She pauses, and, raising her hand to her throat,—unable to proceed,—points to the crushed bouquet at her feet, that in its painful death exhales its richest perfume.

“Do you mean to tell me you are jealous of Fancy Charteris?” demands Sir John, who is very white and stern, after a full minute’s pause, during which they have gazed steadily into each other’s eyes.

“It is true,” says Kitty, standing back, and leaning against a chair for support. “Have I not good reason?”

“It is too horrible for belief,”—coldly. “As for these,” taking up the flowers and casting them into the street through the open window, “they are of no account; they can easily be replaced; but faith and trust are more difficult to restore.”

“They are impossible to restore.”

“If you are wilfully blind, I cannot help you. As for me, how can I ever forget this hour?”

“Have I nothing to forget?” retorts she, with a heaving breast. “All the pain and torture of the past month. Shall I retail to you the anguish I have endured? But why speak to you,” cries she, with sudden passion: “it is too late. Go!”—pointing with one exquisitely rounded bare white arm to the door: “you have no heart.”

“If that is so, I ought to be a happier man than I am,” replies he, bitterly.

“Is a man ever happy with his wife? I am learning every day; and it seems to me any other man’s wife is preferable.”

“Once for all, Kitty,” says Sir John, confronting her quietly, and addressing her in a low but firm tone, “I forbid you to speak to me like that again. Your insinuation a moment since about Mrs. Charteris was, I thought, too disgraceful to be repeated. You insult yourself even more than me when you so speak.”

Kitty is white almost to pallor. The hand resting on the back of the chair is tightly clenched.

“If you are going to the opera to-night,” she says, “I shall not go. I shall not sit in a box with you.”

“I should be sorry to inconvenience you in any way,” returns he, coldly, with a slight shrug. “You shall cer-

tainly have your box to yourself. When I take Mrs. Charteris her flowers, I dare say she will give me a seat in hers."

After which he leaves the room, and presently the house, in a most unenviable frame of mind.

Kitty, going up-stairs, with her new mood still upon her,—erect and handsome, but very pale, with her eyes brilliant, and her breath coming quickly through her delicately curved nostrils,—finds upon her dressing-table the flowers intended for her. They are—she has to confess this truth even to herself—far lovelier than those she had so cruelly ill used below; they are all pure white, exquisitely arranged, the monotony of their beauty relieved here and there by little feathery branches of rare ferns of a vivid green. She acknowledges their charm; yet, lifting them remorselessly, as though she hates the innocent things, she carries them into Sir John's dressing-room and lays them on his table.

Returning to her own room, she raises the gas even higher, and deliberately and earnestly examines her features in a mirror. Yes, it is a fair face; she is handsome (it would be only ridiculous prudery to deny this fact to herself). But she is pale, too pale. And if, when he is beside her, he should glance across and mark a defect in his own wife—! No, there shall be no defect.

Lifting a little gilded pot from the table, she looks into it, and then quickly, as though determined not to hesitate, yet with a faint grimace that savors of distaste, she touches her cheeks lightly with the rouge it contains.

It has been there a long time; once, through very idleness, she had bought it, but had never used it. Indeed, she had no need of it, the warmth of her own skin being coloring sufficient for her.

But to-night it stands her in good stead. The rich glow it lends to the pallid cheeks makes darker, lovelier the eyes above it. Her lips are crimson. Her soft brown hair lies in artistic disorder on her low broad forehead. The maize satin of her gown suits her to perfection, and, almost cheered by the faultlessness of the vision reflected in her glass, she smiles. Mrs. Charteris may be pretty, but there will be few handsomer than Kitty Blunden in the house to-night. Throwing her cloak round her, she takes up her fan and gloves and goes down to her carriage.

She finds Gretchen before her in her box, and Brandy. Dandy has gone over to Mrs. Charteris to receive some imaginary message from that coquette.

Fancy, in spite of her rupture with her lover, is looking charming. The black velvet gown she wears renders even more youthful her *mignonne* features. Her golden hair is carefully arranged; a few simple silver chains are clasped around her throat. She has Cyclamen with her, and Dandy, who is plainly rapturously happy. But his happiness is of short duration: presently it dies a sudden death, as the door opening admits Sir John Blunden, and, close behind him, Arthur!

Fancy, as she sees the latter, in her heart of heart laughs aloud; but outwardly she is frozen dignity itself. In fact, it is plain to all beholders that she does not see Mr. Blunden. He might as well be in the moon, or in any other remote and impossible region, for all the notice she takes of him; while she receives Sir John cordially, bestowing upon him her brightest smile, and accepting almost tenderly the flowers he lays before her, a fac-simile of those destroyed by Kitty's demon.

Sir John stoops to say something—no doubt uncommonly flattering—as he presents his debt; Mrs. Charteris raises her face to his with an expression on it meant to madden Arthur beyond endurance. It is a perfect tableau. Kitty even at this distance sees and marks the pretty scene, and draws her breath quickly.

Gretchen, with her great blue eyes fixed upon the "Diva," who is singing her sweetest, knows of nothing that is going on around her, being rapt in a musical ecstasy: she is for once blind and deaf when her gentle influence is so badly needed.

Turning her gaze from the opposite box, Kitty lets it fall slowly upon the stalls beneath, and presently becomes aware of a lorgnette fixed immovably upon her. The owner of it, seeing her glance attracted, politely removes it, and then she sees it is Cecil Launceston who is so intently watching her with evident though restrained admiration.

The demon, not yet slain, moves her. Her lips part in a careful smile. She makes the very faintest motion with her fan, and Launceston, rising, makes his way slowly past old ladies and innocent maidens and fat men to her box.

She makes him welcome. She is, indeed, specially good to him. Yes, he may stay, if he cares to,—with a bewildering smile. "What a good house it is, and how magnificently she is singing! And how lovely Mrs. Charteris is looking to-night. No? He doesn't admire her? How strange! But he is without taste: every one admires her."

Every one may admire her if they choose; he doesn't. And he is sorry for "every one:" there is no knowing where a lead will carry some people. She is too *bizarre*, dolly, soulless, for him. And he cannot think he is without taste. He has his own ideal, and must worship it, not this or any other man's idol. And so on, and on.

And Kitty listens, and approves, and in her heart thinks him wearisome to the last degree, but encourages his vapid talk until Sir John notices their earnestness and grows *distract*,—so *distract* that at the close of the evening he forgets to offer his arm to Fancy, and, opening the door, lets Arthur take the reluctant little beauty to her carriage in spite of herself. Dandy has gone on with Lady Cyclamen, and Sir John, making his way to the hall, finds Kitty there with Launceston, awaiting her carriage. Gretchen and Brandy have disappeared.

He goes calmly up to her, and gently, but in a manner not to be mistaken, draws her hand within his arm. Launceston bows to some one in the crowd, and then to Lady Blunden, and then retires; and Jack, bending to arrange a fold in Kitty's cloak, says, in a low tone, full of regret,—

"Are things to go altogether wrong with us, Kitty?"

And Kitty, because of something in her throat, and because her eyes are so full of tears that she cannot raise them, makes him no answer, but presses her fingers upon his arm. The pressure is warmly returned, and then, their names being called, they enter their brougham, and she cries her heart out in his arms all the way home.

Yet let no one think that the glazing over of a deep wound can heal it. Sooner or later it will break forth again, to wring the sufferer's soul with anguish. Only the surgeon's knife, the sudden probe, the baring to one's sight of the bullet that has cut so treacherously into the tender flesh, can restore peace and happiness and comfort.

But to return to Fancy and her undesired companion.

Finding herself actually entrapped into accepting Arthur's assistance, she loses all patience, or at least pretends to.

"What brought you to my box to-night?" she demands, imperiously, as they make their way through the landing. "I understood we were to be strangers for the future; and I am no whit better now than I was this morning, when you so much objected to me."

Arthur is silent. He evidently considers discretion, when with a woman, the better part of valor.

"And why did you offer me your arm just now?" goes on she, with some indignation. "You knew I wished to go out with Sir John; at least you knew perfectly I did not wish to go out with you!"

Mr. Blunden still maintains a discreet silence. It irritates his companion far more than words. "You did it on purpose," she says, aggravatingly. "I saw it in your eyes! You were determined to compel me against my will to accept your services!"

Even at this thrilling moment Mr. Blunden declines to speak.

"Are you deaf?" asks Mrs. Charteris, with much disgust. "If so, of course I'm sorry for you. But if there is one thing on earth I hate, it is a person who won't answer. You know you are dying to tell me you don't wish to be with me now or at any other time, and, just to vex me, you won't say it. I can't bear such meanness."

"I'm not dying to say anything of the kind," retorts Arthur, stung into making some reply. "I never tell lies. Why should I? I am most certainly (in spite of all my resolutions to the contrary) very desirous of being with you not only now but always. I accepted most thankfully the chance thrown in my way of being of some small good to you just now. After all,"—mournfully,—"I should have been wiser had I thrown myself upon your cousin's mercy."

"You would indeed,"—remorselessly,—"and far happier."

"Oh, no, not happier,"—very earnestly. There is a humility, a want of pride, about this speech eminently flattering. Fancy, in her turn, is silent.

Presently, the corridor becoming more crowded, and she having relinquished his arm some time since in the heat of her argument, Arthur says, gently,—

"I think you had better take my arm again."

"No, thank you,"—coldly: "I like walking by myself."

"But not here, surely. A little farther on you may be crushed."

"I should rather be crushed than touch you," returns she, with all the air of a spoiled child,—which she is.

Presently, however, getting into the press of people, and finding that gradually the crowd is separating him from her, Arthur with some determination takes her hand and holds it fast,—unrebuked! Doubtless madam is rather relieved than otherwise that he has so peremptorily disobeyed orders.

In the hall *Cyclamen* is nowhere to be seen.

"She has gone; and she half promised to come home with me," says Mrs. Charteris, looking vaguely round her. "She must have forgotten all about it. How careless, how thoughtless of her!" turning up two distressed blue eyes, that still sparkle with resentment to Arthur.

"If you will allow me I will see you home."

"Oh, no! Not for the world would I give you so much trouble,"—coldly.

"Well, then, may I try if I cannot hurry your carriage?"—quite as coldly.

"I came in *Cyclamen's*," explains she, dejectedly. "Now, how am I to get home? I said something to her, early in the evening, about going to supper at the *Lestranges'*, and I suppose she altogether misunderstood me. How awkward it all is!"

"My brougham is somewhere outside. It is yours, if indeed"—bitterly—"you will deign to make use of it."

"I suppose I must," returns she, ungraciously, yet with surprising alacrity, and presently suffers herself to be conducted to it by this ill-used young man.

Having seen her comfortably settled, Mr. Blunden raises his hat and says "Good-night" and moves aside that the door may be closed. But beauty, as we all know, is at times capricious. Mrs. Charteris, with the most unexpected concern in her tone, says, with surprise,—

"Are not you coming too?"

"Oh! thank you, no. I should not dream of intruding. Pray do not give yourself an instant's thought on my account."

"How unkind of you!" says Fancy, with a charming pout, turning her face towards him, and leaning a little forward, so that the gaslight above falls upon her, revealing every charm,—the softness of the sapphire eyes, the archness of the lips, the sheen of her yellow hair, touching even, though faintly, the pale rose that nestles in it. "How unkind of you, when you know how I detest driving by myself, and how I abhor my own society!"

Then, with a slight drawing back of her skirts, as though to make room for him, and a sudden smile that dazzles him, she says, "Come."

And he goes.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"And though ye kill my *hope*, not yet my *love*.

* * * * *
'O! happy world,' thought Pelleas, 'all meseems,
Are happy; I the happiest of all.'—TENNYSON.

A SILENCE falls upon them that is almost unbroken until her home is reached, and then, when he would have departed, she touches him with her soft hand, and he follows her through hall and anteroom to the little sanctum he knows so well.

"You will take a glass of wine with me," she says, in the saddest of tones, "even though henceforth we be indeed strangers."

A tiny tray, ready prepared, is laid upon a distant table; going to it, she pours him out some wine, and with a little touch of melancholy, and some faint sorrow in her glance, hands it to him.

"I beg your pardon," he says, quickly, being so lost in thought that he has forgotten to assist her.

"No, let me help you," she says, softly, in a voice almost heart-broken.

Arthur, taking the glass from her, gazes at her reproachfully. Oh, how can anything so fair be false! Turning from her with an impatient sigh, he falls back upon his old position on the hearth-rug, and, leaning his elbow on the mantel-piece, stares at the place where the fire ought to be.

"Now," says Mrs. Charteris to herself, "what on earth am I to say next?"

There is a lengthened pause. Then, her tact seldom failing her for very long, she says, gently,—

"Will you not even look at me, Arthur?"

"No," says Arthur, "I will not."

"But why, then? It is not so long ago since you told me you loved to look at me. Has time proved so unkind as to render me ill-favored in a few days? Dear Arthur, I must have a shameful glass; it lies to me. It never told of this awful change that has taken place."

Here the little hypocrite sighs profoundly, and casts a lamentable glance at a mirror opposite Arthur, in which she knows he can see her if he will. He does not lift his head, however, and the touching look is thrown away.

"I do not look at you because I dare not," he says, regretfully. The regret is for his own weakness.

"You make me out a thing of horror. You say you are afraid to look at me. One would imagine I was a Medusa! Oh, Arthur, I did not think you would call me a snake,—a viper!"

Her voice trembles perceptibly. And Arthur, hearing the vibration, says, hastily, if a little savagely,—

"Nonsense! You know what I mean,—what a fool I am in your hands. Were I to encounter your eyes now, I fear—I fear—I should forget all that has taken place."

"Is that it?" says Mrs. Charteris, blithely, with a complete change of manner. "Then I insist upon your looking instantly."

Arthur does not move.

"Must I compel you?" she says, and, gliding round in front of him, she lays one white little jewelled hand upon his shoulder, while with the other she turns his handsome reluctant face to hers.

He obeys her touch, and marks silently, wistfully, sadly, the lovely *riante* face, the lustrous eyes, the laughing lips so near his own.

Then he too smiles in spite of himself, and with a sigh resigns himself to the inevitable. He encircles her with his arms and draws her close to him.

"I am forgiven, then?" asks Fancy, maliciously.

"Yes, I suppose so. But, oh, darling,"—with infinite tenderness, "how could you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Why,—why,—encourage Sir John so terribly. To spend a whole evening alone with him."

"I didn't," says Fancy.

"But I saw you with my own eyes."

"You didn't," says Fancy.

"Not see you last night alone with Blunden?"

"Not a little bit," says Mrs. Charteris. "Laura Redesdale was with us, but I suppose, at the unlucky moment you saw us, she had run on to her carriage. Now that you have forgiven me for what I never did, I shall tell you all about it, and then—then"—with a prophetic shake of her blonde head—"I shall forgive you."

And then she tells him all about that innocent dinner at Richmond, and of how Laura was with her, and that dear stupid Lady Inman, who is propriety itself. And of course he is very contrite, and cries *mea culpa* as often as she requires it, and is, I think, happier in his renewed trust than he has ever been before in all his life.

He would have kissed her when the recital and the comments thereon are at an end, but she draws back from him, and lays her fingers lightly against his lips.

"No, no," she says; "I am afraid it can never be quite the same thing with us again."

"Fancy! what is it you mean?" asks he, aghast.

"So many things have happened, so many words been said. You have distrusted me, you may distrust me again."

"Never, never, indeed."

"So you would have said last week. And how can you be sure? One can be certain of nothing until one goes through the fire. We were happy when you were only my friend, we have not been quite so happy since you have been my lover; let us then be friends again."

"That is absurd," says Blunden. "How can you expect me to be contented with friendship, after all that has come and gone?"

"There is nothing so lasting as a calm friendship, founded on esteem," says she, demurely.

"To have looked upon you as my own for so many weeks,

and now to be asked to give you up to any other fellow who may choose to make love to you."

"Oh, no, I sha'n't ask you to give me away,"—provokingly: "my brother has promised to do that. And you know he is coming home."

"I suppose it comes to this, that you don't care for me," says Arthur, irritably. "If you did, you could hardly suggest so cold an arrangement. It is more than you can expect me to concede to. I am not a stone or a stick."

"Oh, do look at yourself," says Fancy, merrily, "you are so funny, you are making your poor hair look so ridiculous, rumpling it up like that."

"You are the only woman I ever cared for in all my life," says Arthur, pathetically, not hearing or heeding the interruption, "the only one I ever shall care for, and——"

"Oh, but do look at yourself," persists she, with the gayest laugh imaginable,—a clear, ringing laugh of pure enjoyment: "your hair is standing straight up. You remind me of some one I saw once at the Haymarket, or in Paris at the Grand Cirque,—I forget which,—but I know it amused me intensely. I wish you would look in the glass."

"Oh, hang my hair!" says Arthur, impatiently, forgetting himself: "it doesn't count."

"Well, there isn't much of it, certainly," acquiesces she, agreeably; "there might even, with advantage, be more. I shouldn't wonder if you got bald pretty early, Arthur; and that is always such a drawback to a man, isn't it?"

"Fancy," says Arthur, suddenly falling on his knees before her, "do not be obdurate. Forgive me what I confess was a great sin against your goodness. Listen to me,—do, darling!"

"Well, I will," returns Fancy, with all the air of one who is making a great concession. "Now go on." As she speaks she deliberately releases from his the hand he has clasped.

"I think you needn't be so unkind to a fellow," he says: "you might let me hold your hand for half a minute."

"If it will do you any good," says Fancy, generously, "you may hold it for a whole minute."

With Arthur, to get an inch is to take an ell. He slips his arm round her waist, and grows eloquent in his own cause: yet she does not give in, being determined to punish him for his want of faith.

And in the end it so rests that they are to try plain unvarnished friendship for six months, and afterwards—— Well, she will not bind herself: the “afterwards” must arrange for itself.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

“Out of the day and night
A joy has taken flight.
Fresh spring, and summer, and winter hoar
Move my faint heart with grief, but with delight
No more—oh, never more!”—SHELLEY.

FOR many days a grief has been gathering, and now lies heavy upon Gretchen's heart,—a distressing fear, from which she shrinks, that all is not going well with Kitty. There is in Lady Blunden's manner a strange reserve when her husband's name is mentioned, an almost sneering tone in her voice when compelled to speak of him, that argues badly for peace at home. She and Sir John are seldom now—if ever—to be seen together, and though this subdued estrangement, being of an ordinary type, is perhaps unnoticed by the world, to Gretchen's earnest eyes and loving heart it is only too apparent.

Of late Kitty has rather avoided her,—dreading, perhaps, the probing of those gentle eyes that seem to search and reach into the inmost soul,—and, being always fond of gayety, has flung herself, with an unhealthy desire for excitement, into a very vortex of dissipation, wearing out mind and body in a vain effort to forget. How often had she and Jack quarrelled, and confessed each to each, and been forgiven! But a time had come when bitter words had been spoken between them and no forgiveness had been asked by either, and the quarrel had been sullenly laid to one side, and had so festered and grown rank, whilst he and she, with the remembrance of it ever near them, drifted day by day farther and farther apart. They spoke, indeed, but more, as it seemed, with a view to meeting the exigencies of society than from a divine desire for reunion.

One day, when things have been going with them rather worse than usual, Kitty, out of very weariness of spirit, drives to Gretchen, and silent, and out of all heart, and perhaps a little reckless, sinks into a chair in her sister's room, and, having uttered some stupid commonplaces, leans back with a listless gesture, and sighs profoundly.

Hardly knowing what to say, and therefore deeming it wiser to maintain silence, Gretchen goes up to her, and, taking off her bonnet, lays it aside, and smooths back her hair with fond sympathetic fingers.

Kitty, softening perhaps beneath that kindly pressure, turns her face up to Gretchen's and says, suddenly,—

"Tell me, Gretchen, have you never repented your marriage?"

"Kitty! What a question!" says Gretchen, the tears gathering in her blue eyes. "What have I done or said to make you ask it? My dear, no. Were it all to come over again I should do exactly as I have done. My poor boy! my darling! Do you know"—with a little soft blush that renders her absolutely lovely—"I believe I feel for him as a mother must for her sickly child? He is my joy, my delight."

"And your grief,"—quietly.

"Yes,"—with a sigh,—“perhaps so. But then what joy is there in this life that contains no element of sorrow?"

"You are yet a child,"—impatiently. "You are too young to have learned that lesson."

"You always forget I am only a year younger than yourself."

"And you always forget that I am in reality a hundred years older than I seem. They say 'a man is as old as he's feeling:' surely that might also apply to a woman. And so, Meg,"—with a sigh,—“you are happy?"

"Quite. Utterly so."

"And yet there is sadness in your smile."

"How can I help that? Living as I do, I surely must make his unhappiness my own. I would have him as strong as your Jack, if it was the will of God."

"Perhaps if you had your wish you would be none the happier,—perhaps not as happy,"—turning aside.

"My dearest, what a curious tone you use! May I speak, Kitty? Of late, darling,"—very softly, and with infinite

tenderness,—“I have thought—I have feared—that you and Jack are not to each other what you used to be. Have I offended you?”—timidly.

“Did you ever offend any one? But how delicately you put it!”—with a short unlovely laugh. “Why disguise facts that all the world may read? No, we do not get on; that is the precise truth; and, however bad I may be, I am at least oppressively truthful. So he finds me.”

“What are you saying, Kitty? ‘Bad’? My dear, who could dare use such a word towards you? And then your last remark,—how oddly you said that! Would you have me believe dear Jack is not everything he ought to be?”

“I ask you to believe nothing,”—nonchalantly, though a faint spasm crosses her face. “Of course, like all women, you support the man. No doubt, if you think so, it is I who am in the wrong.”

“Darling, how can you speak to me like that? I am fond of Jack; he is my brother, because he is your husband; but you, you are myself. Of course all my sympathies are with you. Tell me now how it is with you. It will relieve your mind to confide in some one.”

“Will it? Let me try, then. It is long since I have known relief of any kind. I am wretched, Gretchen,—desperately so. My whole life is a mistake. I wish it could end, and trouble with it.”

“Go on,” says Gretchen, faintly, kneeling beside her, and encircling her with her arms.

“Divorces are common,” says Kitty, with an attempt at lightness, “and public separations worse: so we have arranged our little affair privately. We have agreed never to interfere with each other or our friendships. We do not clash, as more vulgar people might. It is all excellently managed. I never ask him where he has been,—perhaps because I know. He never asks me,—perhaps because he does not care to know.”

“It is horrible,” says Gretchen, below her breath.

“To you, my dear,”—hardly. “Because you are an angel. As for me (though I wished it over a moment since), there are times when I can still find flavor in my life. I have my own amusements. I have actually, strange as it may sound to you, my lovers.”

"You would not——" begins Gretchen, and then pauses. She is feeling sad and depressed.

"No, I would not. Reassure yourself on that score: I could not. *Noblesse oblige*, you know; and, besides,"—with an indescribably sorrowful look,—“I am your sister. Forgive me that wrong!”

"Kitty, Kitty," cries Gretchen, with a heavy sob. "Don't! It seems only yesterday you were a girl,—you and I together: don't you remember? You were the one I most loved, and admired, and looked up to; and now,—now you speak as one who is without a heart."

"And that is true," says Kitty, slowly. "I have no heart. It is dead, child, killed. You do not understand. How could you? My trust, my prayer, is that you never may." Then, after a little pause, "How one maunders on about one's own grievances," she says, with a smile so frugal that it distresses Gretchen more than if she had wept aloud. "Tell me of yourself,—of Kenneth. Is this new man really doing him any good, or is it a bare hoping against hope?"

"It seems like it, does it not?"—sadly. "Yet still at times I cannot help thinking Ken is actually getting better. His strength seems greater, and his spirits are so improved. You must have noticed that."

"You have faith in Blunt, then, so far?"

"So far, yes. He has certainly been of great service to him. Yet after all, Kitty, of what real use can he be to him unless he can promise him a return to active life? That alone would satisfy Ken."

"Perhaps even that may come to pass."

"It may," says Gretchen, brightening wonderfully. "I wish I could cheer you, Kitty, as you cheer me. I cannot explain to you why, but I have a strange belief in Blunt's power; there is an intensity about him, an utter lack of all feebleness or indecision of any kind, that compels me, though I do not like the man, to admire his character and put faith in him."

"How is it you do not like him? I met him once, and thought him absolutely charming in his own curt, distant fashion. So out of the common, so different from the pretty, stupid builders of compliments one meets daily."

"I can't explain," says Gretchen, with a nervous laugh;

"but whenever I part from him I feel as though some day he will put a knife in my heart."

"Metaphorically speaking, I presume," says Kitty, laughing too, languidly. "What a fanciful girl you always were! And how unhappy that wretched dark young genius is to have incurred your displeasure!"

Before two days have gone past, Gretchen knows why it is she has so instinctively dreaded the "dark young genius." Coming in one day from her drive, fresh and radiant, she goes to the morning-room, where as usual she finds Kenneth.

He has not been reading. His hands are folded idly behind his head; he has all the appearance of one who has been for a long time thinking deeply on some engrossing and perplexing subject.

"All alone?" says Gretchen, regretfully; "that is too bad. I had hoped some one would have come in to save you from yourself. Have you been bored to death?"

"No; I have not been bored,"—a little absently, holding out his hand to her, while his face lights up with the glad smile that always greets her coming. To-day, perhaps, the smile is not so full, so free from care, as usual. "Have you enjoyed yourself?"

"Immensely,"—gayly. "It has been such a lovely afternoon, and the air so delicious. All the world was out and about, and everything was as sunny as possible." Then, quick to notice any cloud upon his face, she says, "You have been worried about something, Ken: tell me what it is."

"Do I betray myself so easily?" he says, slowly, almost, as it seems, with difficulty.

"To me,—yes. Have I not learned to read your heart? But I won't allow you to vex yourself over trifles. Dr. Blunt says you are getting on very satisfactorily, if you will only forget to think."

"It is of him I wish to speak."

"What a solemn tone!" As she says this, half jestingly, she slips down upon a low footstool beside him, still letting him retain her hand. "Well?"

"You know he believes my case not altogether hopeless. But he was here to-day, and says I must go abroad for three months to some German spa of which he thinks highly: and—I am to start next week."

"Is that all? And did you put on that melancholy face about such a mere nothing? Ah, indeed I fear I have spoiled you. It is very good news, is it not? And even if this wonderful man does not effect a complete cure, of which, dearest,"—very tenderly,—“I would not have you be too certain, still the change of scene and air must benefit you. You still look grave. Is it that you dread the trouble of travelling, lazy boy? or is it that you think I cannot get myself ready to start in four days? Were you thinking of me?”

"Yes, of you only. Gretchen,"—with an effort,—“Blunt says I must go—alone.”

"How? You, in your invalid state, to go alone?”

"Not quite. He himself has offered to accompany me.”

"I do not understand. Do you mean to tell me that I, your wife, am not to go with you?”

"Listen to me," says Dugdale, with intense anxiety. "You know how eccentric he is. He says he can cure me, but he will not undertake the task unless he has me completely in his own care. I argued, explained, in vain. He was adamant. He tells me he is willing to give up all his other patients (he has not many, you see, being yet almost unknown), because he thinks if he restores me to health it will make a name for him. But he said plainly he was afraid you would interfere with some of his arrangements.”

"It is infamous,—inhuman," declares Gretchen, drawing her hand forcibly from his, and beginning to pace the room with rapid, agitated steps. She is altogether unlike the Gretchen he has hitherto known; all the softness, gentleness, have disappeared, and here is a Gretchen full of fire and passionate grief, and something that borders on despair. "It is more cruel than anything I ever, ever dreamed of. To separate us, to tear us asunder; and you—you—you support this monster who seeks to render me miserable. And while I break my heart you do not so much as express a regret at the thought of our parting.”

"Gretchen!”

"I shall never submit to it,—never!”

Dugdale's face is very pale. His eyes are full of tears; there is a world of reproach in his expression. As Gretchen looks at him, her short-lived fit of passion dies. (It could

not long find shelter in that gentle home, her breast.) Her lips tremble, her whole heart flies to him. Sinking on her knees beside his couch, she encircles him with her arms.

"I am unjust; forgive me," she says, mournfully. "But, oh, my darling, think well before you take this step. Who will nurse you or guard you as I do? Can this stranger understand your smaller wants, your hours of weariness?"

"It is a last hope," says Dugdale, in a curious tone.

"Ay, a last hope; that is the horror of it. You will centre every thought, every dream of future happiness in this final trial, and if it fails you—you will die!" Here, in spite of a heroic effort at composure, a sob escapes her. "Yes," she goes on, excitedly, "this man will prove your murderer; for who could survive the ruination of so sweet a scheme? He takes you from me, never to give you back!" She breaks down and cries passionately.

"Why will you take so dark a view," says Kenneth, eagerly. "Why not think of the day when I shall return to you, perhaps strong and well, and"—with a deep breath—"as I used to be?"

"Already his fatal spell has begun to work," murmurs she, despairingly. "This man has caught you fast, soul and body. It is too late for me to interfere. Yet I would ask you to pause, Kenneth, to weigh everything,—all that is with all that may be. Are you not in a measure happy as you now are? Why will you tempt fate? Now at least I can see you, hear you; you are with me——" She hesitates, as though some oppressive thought has overcome her. "I tell you again," she says, "to beware of disappointment, to steel yourself against defeat. Is this new doctor wiser than all the others you have seen?"

"I have seen so few, and none I felt any confidence in except this Blunt."

"He may fail you."

"He may cure me."

When a few moments before Gretchen told him he had centred every thought upon this hope, she spoke only the truth. With a longing almost terrible he has grasped it, and is clinging to it as some poor drowning wretch to a frail plank.

"Yes, perhaps,—perhaps," says Gretchen, gloomily. "Oh

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that I knew what was best to do!" she cries to herself, rising once more to her feet, and gazing with large melancholy eyes through the window, as though striving to read through all the smoke and dust of the city the impenetrable future beyond. After a while, coming back again to earth, she says, "What is to become of me during these three months,—this eternity?"

"Your mother, Kitty——" ventures Dugdale, uncertainly.

"No,"—with a faint return of her former warmth and a strong gesture of repugnance,—“if I am to be made wretched I shall suffer in secret. I shall neither see nor speak to any one from the day you desert me until I see you again. I shall live alone in the anticipation of your letters; if, indeed,”—bitterly,—“this new friend will permit you to write to me.”

There is a lengthened pause. The day is dying, fading; a little rosy tint of parting sunlight creeps in and covers with tender glory her face and both her small delicate hands, that lie clasped, as though in prayer or anguish, on her knees. The skies are darkening, the world without is growing hushed; in all the vast sweet blue expanse of heaven but one star shines and glistens sadly, as though filled with holy grief for the restless hearts and tearful eyes and blood-stained souls of the foolish throng beneath.

Within, the minutes, as though weighted with lead, fly heavily. Then Kenneth, putting out his hand, draws Gretchen with gentle force to her old position beside him. His color has deepened; his eyes are larger, darker than usual; his mouth is more determined; he is as one who has killed a heart's desire and taken a mighty resolve to his undoing.

"Darling," he says, and his tone is eager, hurried, as if he feared hesitation and his own strength, "I resign this scheme altogether: I shall not go abroad. By what right do I seek to make you so unhappy? Shall I not cheerfully make this small sacrifice for one who has given up all things for me? Besides, as you said a little while ago, am I not happy now? More blessed than most men who are strong and healthy,"—a faint twinge of pain crosses his brow,—“in that I have you? No, let us go down again to the sweet fresh country, and forget all this madness and this wild dream that may never reach fulfilment.”

At these words, uttered so bravely, yet with such suppressed sadness, all Gretchen's generosity rises within her. By laying down his arms he conquers. She presses her cheek softly to his.

"I am not so selfish, after all," she says. "You shall, I am now quite determined, try this plan. What! do you think I could watch you day by day wearing out your heart in the belief that you might have been cured but for the crotchet of a silly woman? You shall go. You shall come back to me cured,—a different Kenneth from the one I have known, but not one I can love more fondly. While I—I shall try to be happy in your absence,—happy and content."

But this last promise is too much for her: hiding her face on his breast, she bursts into bitter tears.

* * * * *

The next morning, when Blunt calls, he finds himself confronted by a young woman with white cheeks and determined lips and somewhat angry eyes. Can this lovely being, so full of quick reproach and indignation, be the girlish Mrs. Dugdale he has seen, and perhaps admired, but hardly considered as one capable of helping in the work cut out for him?

"You will cure him," says she, turning to him with sudden fire; "you must: you have promised." Then, with a passion full of fear, she goes on, in a low condensed voice, "Do not kill him. If you do, you will have not only one but two murders on your soul."

"Madam," says the ugly young man, calmly, "as you know, or as perhaps you do not know, the world is intensely selfish: we all seek our own good, even more than the good of others. It will, perhaps, comfort you to know that I am only rising in my profession, and that therefore your husband's recovery is with me a matter of life or death. Nay, more," exclaims this strange young man, flinging up his left hand with a curiously strong gesture and laying it on his broad forehead, "it is to me a matter of fame or obscurity. It shall never be obscurity: extinction"—slowly—"will be better than that! Yet I know—I know I shall succeed."

There is that in his tone, a certainty, a self-reliance, that, in spite of all prejudice, comforts Gretchen. A sense of peace falls upon her aching heart, a little flickering smile lights her eyes.

"I give him to you. I trust you," she says, simply, with quivering lips, and, going to her own room, falls on her knees and prays as she never prayed before.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"But I am tied to very thee
By every thought I have;
Thy face I only care to see,
Thy heart I only crave."

SIR C. SEDLEY.

WITH Arthur Blunden's engagement has ended the calm, the cheerful indifference to what the future may contain on which he once so prided himself. There is no longer rest or peace for him on earth. Now that he has almost lost Fancy she seems to him, if possible, more sweet and more desirable than in those happy if slightly trying days when he considered he had some just claim to her.

Yet he himself can hardly tell wherein lies the root and centre of his discontent. She is still all that can be wished, and as a friend inestimable. Nothing can be kinder than her whole demeanor, nothing brighter or more amiable than the smile with which she always greets him. Yet seldom does he quit her side without feeling in his heart some sharp barb, honey-tipped, and innocently planted, no doubt, yet venomous enough to wound and gall for hours.

He is not happy out of her presence, and, alas! he is even less happy in it. To-day he tells himself this hateful estrangement between them is not a lasting grievance, it is but a period of probation, a trial of his faith, a working off of the wrong done to her in his thoughts; she is surely his in mind, bound to him by an affection no time can kill. Did not her glance as they parted, the faint but unmistakable pressure of her soft hand, declare it? At these moments he is feverishly glad, and as a setting to his joyful hopes quotes to himself little passages from songs he fondly believes apply to his own case, or from old-world poems divine in beauty if a trifle rash in sentiment, such as

"My true love hath my heart, and I have his,"

or some fond odds and ends from Shakspeare's sonnets, and so on.

And then comes the morrow and the reaction : and she is kind still, absolutely adorable, yet by a word, a gesture, he feels less sure of her, is pushed, as it were, a whole day's journey from her, and leaves her finally worried, distressed, full of perplexity, and, worse than all, uncertain.

Only yesterday, sitting in her drawing-room, with Arthur somewhere near her, she had lifted her eyes suddenly, and, as he told himself, with a view to fuller self-torture, without premeditation, and had asked him sweetly, as though it were the most natural question in the world from her to him,—

"Is it true then, Arthur, what I hear, that you are going to marry that pretty Maud Steyne? I always said she had the loveliest eyes I ever beheld. But you might have told me!"

Whereupon Arthur, having denied the vile slander angrily and reproachfully, had gone away in a frame of mind the most miserable you could imagine. If she could see no dishonor in his contracting an alliance with another, how could he dare to hope she considered herself anything but free? This thought—need I say?—is agony.

Just now he is standing on the hearth-rug in her morning room, gazing gravely down upon her as she sits in a low chair, playing idly with some colored silks that lie upon her lap. A little kitten is climbing up and down her knees, revelling in her work, and biting her pretty fingers, plainly to her great amusement.

"Was there ever such a bad pussy?" she says, caressingly. "Is this my sole thanks for rescuing you from those little Zulus in the nursery? Oh, kitty, you are an ungrateful creature! By the by," laughing, and glancing up at her silent visitor, "I had rather a time of it this morning with the children,—talking of the nursery reminded me of it,—they did behave so badly to Miss Walker, their governess."

"I'm not surprised," says Arthur, moodily : "I never saw such a nose as that woman has : one can almost see into her brain. Why don't you get some one good-looking to teach them, poor little things?"

"I might be jealous of her. What should I do if you—I mean, if any of my friends were to compare me unfavorably with her? I should die of chagrin. No, Miss Walker is quite delightful; she is plain, and solid, and wholesome, like their own puddings, and very good to them. But to-day there was such a dispute."

A pause.

"Why don't you ask me what it was?" says Mrs. Charteris, justly incensed. "I can't bear a person who stands staring silently at one, and never expresses an interest in anything."

"You mistake me," replies Mr. Blunden, with sudden energy: "my silence arose not from indifference, but from a burning desire to know. I thought you were going to tell me all about it, and I feared if I spoke I might break the thread of your discourse."

"Well, now you shall hear," says Fancy, appeased. "I happened to be passing the school-room, when I heard within voices uplifted, evidently in angry argument. In a rash moment I turned the handle of the door and went in. Poor Miss Walker was standing at the end of the room trying vainly to explain something, with two small furies before her who were talking her down most successfully. When they saw me they ran to me, and declared their fixed determination never—never—never to be taught again by their governess, on the plea that she did not adhere to the strict truth. I declined to listen to such an accusation against the inestimable creature behind the table, whereupon Blanche undertook to enlighten me.

"She says the world is round, Lally, and that we are all sticking on to it like little flies. And that might be true, Lally, I'm not disputing that, because flies do stick to ceilings, I've seen them; but pray,"—triumphantly,—“if it was true, where would the water be? don't you think the sea would all have dropped off long ago? Answer me that!"

"I didn't: I opened the door again and ran for my life. If anything frightens me, it is to be put through my facings by a child."

Blunden laughs, and presently conversation grows brisker, and he deigns to ask her how she enjoyed herself at the ball last night.

"I always enjoy myself," says Fancy, gayly, "especially

when you are very good to me, and very near me ; but last night," with a mischievous laugh, " I had rather more than my usual allowance of fun."

" Had you ?"

" Yes. I don't know whether you have noticed it, but I have danced a considerable number of times with Lord Kenwick lately."

" I have noticed it,"—with unpleasant emphasis.

" Ah! well. What do you think happened last night ?"

" Don't know, I'm sure."

" Then I shall tell you. He actually proposed to me."

" And you refused him ?"

" Well, I don't know ; not quite, I think. He is a good fellow, you know, and that, and quite fun."

" You accepted him then, I presume ?"—pale and wrathful, and with angry anxiety.

" Well, I'm not sure. I rather think I left the question in abeyance. I was taken by surprise, you see. In fact, I had no idea what was going to happen until we went into that small conservatory off the supper-room,—where you and I were the dance before, you remember ?—and there he took my hand, and——"

" He took your hand !"

" Yes, dear : why ?"

" And you allowed it ?"

" Yes, dear : why not ?"—raising to his her lovely guileless eyes, blue as sapphires, and clothed in innocent surprise. " He didn't attempt to bite it, you know, and I didn't mind it the least little bit. Besides, he really was so impetuous I couldn't prevent him ; and perhaps I never thought of doing so, either. There was no harm in it ; of course, if I was engaged to, or going to be married to, another man, it would be wicked ; but as it is——"

She pauses, and pulls the kitten's tail, and thoroughly enjoys the situation, while Blunden, with his eyes fixed moodily upon the carpet, finds to his discomfiture that he has no right to bring her to task.

" Well," goes on Fancy, cheerfully, " as I was telling you, he took both my hands, and said——"

" I don't want"—savagely—" to hear what he said, or did either."

"No?"—reproachfully; "and you told me you would be my friend. And what is the use of a friend, except to be one's confidant? I must tell my secrets to somebody."

"Not to me, then."

"Then you are not my friend."

"No, I am sure I am not," returns he, angrily; and with ruffled brow and set lips he takes up his hat and leaves the house.

CHAPTER XXX.

"Oh, would it were
Delusion! but I fear some greater ill.
I feel as if out of my bleeding bosom
My heart were torn in fragments."

Magico Prodigioso.

THE week has taken to itself wings and flown away; it has hastened with all its might, unmindful of those who, with outstretched arms, would have detained it. Perhaps in mercy it has sped, to end suspense and shrinking expectation; and Gretchen, standing on the vanishing edges of it, with empty hands and desolate heart, knows herself bereft of her chief good. He is gone,—“her joy, her sorrow!” nay, her love, her husband,—and day seems merged in night.

Just at the very end, when the final farewell had to be uttered, she had fallen on her knees beside him and had begged of him one last promise.

“If an hour should come, Kenneth, when you feel even a shade worse, promise me faithfully you will not keep me in ignorance of it for an hour. You will write to me at the moment, then, without delay?”

“I promise. I——”

“You will not say to yourself, ‘I shall delay until the morrow: the day may bring relief’? You will wait for nothing, you will not hesitate, whatever that—that man may advise?”

“Have I not given my word, darling? Even now, at the very last, if it makes you suffer so much, let me give up this idea and stay at home with you.”

"No, no; rather go now, while I have strength to part from you."

So he is taken from her, and she, with her face hidden in her hands, remains motionless in the centre of the room, too wretched almost for thought. She has not gone down-stairs to the hall with him, lest the man she counts her enemy—inasmuch as he has been instrumental in enticing Kenneth from her—should mark her pallid lips and dry, miserable eyes. She hardly knows how long she remains there without movement, but presently she sways a little, and would perhaps have fallen, but that a sound from the world without arouses her. It is the scrape of a wheel, the click of horses' feet.

Oh, to see him once again! to hear his voice! A sickening fear that never more shall her eyes rest on his overwhelms her. Rushing to the window, she gazes eagerly downwards, but too late; the brougham is out of sight, has disappeared round the corner. He is indeed gone.

She turns away, feeling, if possible, more forlorn than a moment since. Why had she not gone to the window sooner? Perhaps, when in the carriage, he had looked up, and hoped to see her, and been disappointed. How selfish, how heartless, he must consider her! and now he is beyond reach, and she cannot tell him ever—ever—of the anguish of spirit that had deadened and crushed all thought within her. Where is he now, at the station? Not yet, surely; but where then? And—and where is she? and what is the matter with the walls? How they close and draw together!

With a last natural effort of self-preservation she puts out her hand, and sinks into a low chair beside her.

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Five minutes later Kitty (who has calculated almost to a nicety the time of Kenneth's departure) enters the room, and finds her senseless, pale and wan as a snowdrop born of last night's dew, with her hands hanging lifelessly at her sides.

Scenes of every description being abhorrent to Lady Blunden, she forbears to summon gaping servants. From a vase on a table near she procures some water, and, having administered divers pattings and shakings and an unlimited supply of eau de cologne, gradually restores Gretchen to consciousness.

"What is it?" she asks, faintly, putting her fingers to her eyes in a vain endeavor to recollect. "Did I faint? How foolish of me!"

"Well, yes, I really think so,—very foolish," returns Kitty, who, like most people, is a little angry because very frightened. "I thought you had more common sense. But, of course, at such a time you should not have been left alone."

The last word recalls everything. The soft flickering touch of color that had come so unwillingly to Gretchen's cheek now flies it again, to seek refuge in her aching heart.

"I remember it all now," she says, tremulously. "He is gone, Kitty,—gone! and"—clasping her fingers tightly together on her knees and bending rather forward—"some horrible thing tells me I shall never see him again."

"Every one thinks that at the hour of parting. It is all nonsense," says Kitty, briskly. "Why should you not see him again, and stronger and better too than you have ever yet seen him? My dear, don't be morbid. It upsets one so, and doesn't do the least good."

"If I might only have gone with him."

"Well, you know, in your place," says Lady Blunden, with determination, "I should certainly pack up my things and follow him. I have no patience with that young man's airs, separating people from their husbands. I think he must be out of his mind."

"He is such a strange man, that one hardly dares to oppose him; and then he may be successful. I really believe, were I to adopt your advice, he would pack up his things and return to England in the evening. And then how I should blame myself! But I have often thought, Kitty,—"very timidly, as though ashamed of the fond romantic fancy,—"*"I should like to disguise myself, and take rooms in the German town, and watch each day until I got one glimpse of him."*

"I wonder how old you are?" asks Kitty, scornfully, but with tears in her eyes; "one hundred and fifty, or five? Such ideas, my dear child, are utterly exploded, if indeed they ever existed. You must be very weak and nervous to talk so like 'The London Journal.' Tell me, do you still intend going down to Laxton?"

"Yes. I shall go this evening. I could not stay in this house longer than can be helped. I almost hate it."

"You must get mamma, then, or Flora to stay with you."

"Not just yet. I shall be better by myself for a few days. And, besides, I should bore them with my bad spirits. It would be unfair to afflict them with them."

"Dear Gretchen, do try to think of yourself sometimes. I only wish I could go down with you; but I am bound to attend this ball at Lady Monckton's on the 27th."

"You must not miss that. It cannot fail to be charming."

"Its charms could hardly attract me,"—carelessly,—
"though I confess a masked ball will be a novelty; but, you see,"—tapping the slender fingers of one hand rather impatiently on the back of the other,—
"I have promised to go to it."

"Whom have you promised, Kitty?"

"Oh, many people," says Kitty, but without letting her eyes rest on Gretchen's. The latter regards her anxiously.

"At least," she says, presently, speaking very gently, and with the sweetest intent, "if I cannot have you with me on the 27th, I shall know you are keeping me in your thoughts all night."

Kitty, turning, kisses her somewhat impulsively.

"As a talisman to keep out all less holy thoughts?" she says, with a poor attempt at lightness. "Very well, darling: that shall be so. And afterwards I shall run down to Laxton, to see how you are getting on. Indeed,"—slowly,—
"I think I shall not go abroad at all this autumn: I shall stay at home and look after you."

"That would be too great a sacrifice; and what would Jack say to it?"

"Sir John?"—with a slight quick frown and an unlovely laugh. "I thought I had explained matters to you sufficiently to make that remark unnecessary. He will doubtless thank Kenneth devoutly for his timely departure, and look upon my absence as a relief too deep for words."

CHAPTER XXXI.

"And if ye love me not
I cannot bear to dream you so forsworn:
I had liefer ye were worthy of my love,
Than to be loved again of you."

Pelleas and Ettarre.

"COME in," says Kitty, quietly.

She is standing before her glass, adding one or two last finishing touches to the already charming picture it reveals. So lovely is it, that involuntarily her lips part, and she smiles at it, as though honestly in love with her own beauty. It is almost a pity, she tells herself, to hide so fair a face beneath the small mask lying on the couch beyond.

Her maid, tired of admiration, which, though of the silent order, she takes care shall be felt, has left her. She is at this moment quite alone.

Sir John, opening the door, comes in, and closes it behind him. So many weeks have come and gone since those happy days when he would seek her room to sit and talk to her during her toilet, that Kitty, pausing in her occupation, stares at him expectantly, and colors very distinctly. There is in her expression a marked surprise, hardly complimentary.

"Don't let me disturb you," says Blunden, in a tone cold and forced: "I found this note from Gretchen, directed to you, in my pocket; it came enclosed in a letter to me this morning, but I quite forgot to deliver it until now."

His voice is suggestive of indifference. He barely glances at her as he speaks, and betrays not the faintest shadow of admiration. What woman could stand such evil behavior! Kitty's lips tighten and her blush fades. Taking the little note from him (that Gretchen had sent through him, and the fond hope that it might cause some kindly words to be spoken between them), she deliberately turns her back on him and begins to read it. Whereupon Sir John, finding her eyes occupied, raises his head, and, changing his tactics, looks at her a good deal.

By her impetuous movement she has placed herself in

front of a large mirror. In it he can see each line of her face and figure, can mark the haughty, beautiful features, the long dark lashes that cast faint shadows on her cheeks, the perfect mouth that once—and not so long ago—had only smiles and tender words for him.

Her bosom, beneath the amber satin of her gown, rises and falls in quick pulsations with some hidden agitation, surely caused by a feeling stronger than could be created by the mere perusal of Gretchen's letter. Yet, sweet as is the vision in the mirror, Sir John tells himself she is—than it—
“as much lovelier as herself is lovelier than all others.”

Looking up in a minute or two, she meets his eyes in the glass, and, slowly turning, confronts him.

“Thank you,” she says, icily: “you were kind to bring it yourself; but Minton could have spared you the trouble.”

Minton is the maid.

“I never give open notes to servants,”—curtly.

“I dare say you are right,”—carelessly: “so for the future I shall ask Gretchen to direct my letters to myself. I can't think what she meant by enclosing it in yours.”

“Possibly she saw nothing strange in sending a note to a wife through her husband,”—with a slight sneer: “she has much to learn.”

“She has indeed. She has not been fortunate enough to secure so willing a mentor as I have. But pray do not let me detain you longer. Are you coming with me to Twickenham to-night?”

The almost insolence of her tone irritates him past endurance.

“I really don't know whether I shall be in the way or not,” he returns, bitterly. “Which of your friends is coming?”

Kitty's large eyes blaze. Her lip curls. For a full minute she gazes at him intently, as though too possessed with scorn for speech. And it is at this unlucky moment that the door opens, and Minton, entering with a rare and exquisite bouquet, presents it to her mistress.

“With Mr. Launceston's compliments, my lady,” she says; after which, scenting battle in the breeze, she retires discreetly.

Kitty, holding the fragrant blossoms to her face, inhales their perfume slowly.

"How delicious!" she says to herself, with a pleasure greatly exaggerated. "How thoughtful to send them! They are my favorite flowers."

There is a rather lengthened pause, and then Blunden says, in a curiously changed tone, so calm it is, and so carefully suppressed,—

"Do you permit Launceston to send you flowers?"

"I certainly have not forbidden him to do so."

"He is then in the habit of sending them?"

"These are not the first he has sent, if you mean that."

"They shall be the last,"—quietly.

"You mean you will desire me not to accept them?"

"Certainly not. I should not presume to dictate to you on any subject,"—bitterly. "I shall speak to Launceston."

"How like you that will be!"—with a contemptuous shrug of her fine shoulders: "it will be in exact keeping with all your conduct to make your wife's name a by-word. Speak lightly of me, by all means. No doubt I have deserved it at your hands. But first answer me one question: Is it worse for me to receive these flowers than for you to send them?"

"You allude to those I sent Mrs. Charteris. The cases are widely different: mine were given merely as payment of a debt."

"You are quite right to give it a decent name. Well, let us then say that these flowers from Mr. Launceston are for payment of another debt."

"You trifle,"—sternly. "I have not spoken on this subject before, but now you shall listen to me. This man follows you wherever you go, haunts your footsteps, betrays in a thousand ways the passionate admiration he plainly feels for you, and has felt for some time past; yet, knowing all this, you encourage his attentions, and accept the homage that can be only an insult."

Kitty's hands tighten on the flowers she is holding, and her lips pale. She is an intensely proud woman, one whom nature would compel to reject with quick indignation advances from any man except her husband. To hear Sir John now accuse her of encouraging Launceston's attentions is exceedingly bitter to her. Yet, rather than forego her revenge, she accepts the situation as it stands, and, refusing to permit herself a reply to his last speech, says, calmly,—

"And you? Were there then no passages between you and Mrs. Charteris in the old days before we met? Take care, Sir John; people living in glass houses should be careful to throw no stones."

"Recriminations are worse than useless,"—coldly,—“and we have gone into all that before. You only play with the question. Kitty, you will not wear those flowers to-night.”

"I certainly shall, as you will see later on."

"That is unlikely. I shall not go to Lady Monckton's if you persist in your determination."

"No?"—with a quick start. Then, controlling all emotion, "You will please yourself about that, of course. But I think, considering what a pronounced ball it is likely to be, and how the world talks, and how far from being above suspicion is our domestic felicity, that, no matter how distasteful the task may be, it is your duty to accompany me."

"You seem very clear about other people's duties; it is a pity you can't see your own."

"I do see it. But for a mere whim of yours I am not going to behave ungraciously to Cecil Launceston. There is no harm in what I am doing. I never knew it was wrong to accept a simple bunch of flowers from a friend."

"Your taking them, after all I have said,—after all you know,—is a deliberate insult to me."

"You will not come with me, then?" demands she, deliberately, confronting him with a cold and steady light in her eyes. She moves a step nearer to him, and in the gleam of the wax candles that illumine the room her clinging satin gown shimmers softly. Some diamonds are glittering in her hair and sparkling on her neck. Just now, with the passionate defiance and reproach upon her face, she looks like a queen.

Blunden, almost as handsome in his own way, stands at a little distance from her, his face dark with anger, and, though acknowledging her beauty, is quite unmoved by it.

"I have told you my condition," he replies, immovable determination in his tone.

"And I have refused to comply with it."

Sir John bows. "That settles the question," he says, gravely.

"You positively refuse to come with me?"

"I positively do."

Kitty, raising one hand, lays it impulsively upon her bosom. There is majesty and something like despair in the gesture. The other hand rests, as though seeking support, upon the arm of the chair near her.

"That ends it," she says, in a low, compressed voice, that somehow, in spite of his anger, disturbs him strangely. "It is your own doing. If any harm arises from it, blame yourself."

"What do you mean by that?" demands he, hastily. "Is it a threat?"

"Whatever you like. Go; you are wasting your time here."

"The carriage is ready, my lady," says Minton, opening the door; and Blunden, feeling himself dismissed, with her last words ringing in his ears, leaves the room unwillingly, and, descending the stairs, finds Arthur awaiting him in the library below.

"You here?" he says, wearily, sinking into a chair. "What is it, Arthur?"

"Not much," says that young man, scanning his cousin's features anxiously, but secretly. "The fact is, I never meant to go to this ball, but at the last moment I have changed my mind, and now"—with a laugh—"my going seems to me a matter of life or death."

"Then go."

"But I haven't a domino. A wild hope that you might be able to lend me one has brought me here. We are so much the same height and figure, I dare say yours would suit me. I know you used to do a great deal of masquerading one winter in Rome, and it occurred to me you might have a second."

"No, I have only one; but you can have it," says Jack, with his eyes fixed absently upon the paper-knife he has taken from the table.

"Yours, my dear boy? No; not that. Surely you are going to Twickenham yourself?"

"Surely I am not,"—smiling. "I too have changed my mind at the last moment."

"But what a sudden decision! There is something wrong with you, Jack."

"Very likely. There is something wrong with most people, is there not? Say I have got a headache, neuralgia, a fit of the spleen, what you will,—I don't care what name you give it. I shall not go to this mad dance to-night."

"You refuse to confide in me?" says Arthur, gently, perhaps a little hurt at the other's tone.

"Well, and if I do? What then? There are things a man must grin and bear in silence, and—I hate whiners myself, and so do you. You are going, Arthur? Wait; let me send for the domino."

There is a short pause while the servant comes and goes and returns again with the soft fawn-colored garment in question.

"You were right in your surmise," says Jack, glancing at it with some small interest. "The last time I wore this domino was in Rome, during one of the liveliest nights I ever put in. See the red cross on the shoulder: it was stitched on for a purpose. To-morrow, if not too done up, drop in and tell me how you get on. Though I doubt whether you will have as much fun out of it as I had in those good old days in Italy."

"Are not your present days better?" asks his cousin, regarding him gravely. "Why should you look back with such regret upon your past? You are certainly happier now."

"Beyond all doubt,"—with a queer laugh. "Ten thousand times happier. I have literally nothing left to wish for. Money, a title, the world's respect (what married man is without that?), and—a wife who adores me."

"True, you have all that. Kitty surely loves you."

"I said adores me. You put it too weakly," says Blunden, still with the odd laugh. "My good Arthur, don't give yourself the habit of staring people out of countenance. It is execrable form. Go. You are late as it is. The woman who doubtless tells you she adores you is suffering agonies of suspense all this time."

With a gentle friendly push he guides him to the door.

"Well, good-night, old man. I'm awfully obliged, do you know," says Arthur, gratefully. Then he hesitates even on the threshold, and says again, "I wish you were coming."

"Don't be hypocritical," replies Sir John, with a smile,

pointing to the domino. "My going now would, I dare say, reduce you to despair. Good-night. I hope that red cross will bring you luck."

CHAPTER XXXII.

BEAT. "I was about to protest I loved you."

BENE. "And do it with all thy heart."

BEAT. "I love you with so much of my heart, that none is left to protest."

Much Ado About Nothing.

To swear in the morning by all his gods that nothing should induce him to go to this ball; to protest with even more earnestness, if less bad language, to the same effect at noontide, to waver towards evening, to give in and get possessed with a maddening desire to go to it at nightfall,—thus had Mr. Blunden's mind been exercised all day, from "morn to dewy eve."

Unfortunately, yesterday he had met Mrs. Charteris; and whether she thought he looked too happy to be let go in peace, or whether she had been listening to some little false story about him, retailed by a dearest friend, I know not, but she was certainly unkind to him than usual, and sent him from her calm outwardly but filled with a determination never to see her again. He would be no woman's slave,—so he told himself (they all tell themselves that, you know, at intervals). And as to going down to Twickenham to meet her to-morrow night, no earthly consideration should bring him to do it.

He played rather high at night, and won everything before him, which annoyed him a good deal. In his then frame of mind it would have solaced him to lose, as giving him another chance of railing against adverse fortune. But he won, and heavily, and went home and slept not at all, and, rising in the morning unrefreshed, found himself still faithful to his vow not to go to Lady Monckton's.

At four he went to see Laura Redesdale, and there found Fancy, so sweet, so radiant, so utterly oblivious of having wronged him in thought, word, or deed, that he was fairly bewildered. She was almost tender to him, and so honestly

distressed at his resolution not to see her in the evening that, though he left her for once victor, his heart was melted within him.

Yet for his word's sake he clung to his purpose all through the evening, and sat silently smoking at his club, until, as ten o'clock struck, he rose up, and, flinging his cigar far from him, declared to himself he must and would see her again to-night or perish in the attempt. Perishing, as we have seen, was not upon the cards, Sir John's domino having fallen to his lot as it were a fairy gift.

* * * * *

Walking through the brilliant, sweetly-perfumed rooms at Twickenham an hour later, with the conspicuous red cross upon his shoulder, and only the lower part of his face seen, his resemblance to Sir John is so remarkable that even he himself cannot refrain from smiling as he marks it in a passing mirror.

Once or twice a mutual acquaintance accosts him by his cousin's name; and three times in moving to and fro he is puzzled by the earnest gaze of two large dark eyes that follow him intently as he goes. The reflection that the owner of these earnest eyes is clad in satin of a golden shade, that glitters bravely in the gay light, crosses his mind, but he fails to recognize Kitty, so eager is his search for a *mignonnette* figure and a small proud head crowned with yellow hair.

Yet a whole hour passes without result of any kind except failure; and, almost giving up hope, he leans against the door of a conservatory that opens on to the gardens from a veranda outside, and wonders vaguely whether he shall seek her on the terraces or come to the conclusion that she has not put in an appearance to-night.

What if she had stayed away because he had declared his intention of not being present? His heart beats quickly at this thought. If he could dare to believe that—if——

"Sir John," says a low soft voice at his elbow.

He starts violently, unable to control himself as the accents so dear to him reach his ear, and looks round. Yes, it is she; close to him, looking up at him with laughing violet eyes that no mask could change, and pretty parted lips.

"Fie!" she says, lightly, "to betray yourself so ingenuously! to start and turn at the first mention of your name!

I gave you credit for more *savoir-faire*, greater *chic*. But tell me, is your cousin, is—Arthur here to-night?"

Blunden makes no spoken reply, lest his voice should betray him. He shakes his head.

"No? Not really?" Surely something comes up from her heart and dims for the moment the lustre of her eyes. Her little rounded chin quivers ever so slightly.

"Where is he, then?" she asks, half petulantly, half plaintively.

"Where should he be but here?" says Arthur, almost roughly. "Can I keep away from you? I am your property; you can do with me as you will."

"But how like Sir John you are!" says Fancy, for once utterly taken aback.

"I tried to stay away," goes on Arthur, taking almost a savage pleasure in his self-abasement. "I swore to myself a hundred times I would not see you again; yet here I am! I was looking over an old Shakspeare to-day, and came upon some lines that I think suit my abject case. Do you know them?"—

"Being your slave, what should I do but tend
Upon the hours and times of your desire?
I have no precious time at all to spend,
Nor services to do, till you require."

* * * * *
Nor dare I question with my jealous thought
Where you may be, or your affairs suppose,
But, like a sad slave, stay and think of nought
Save, where you are, how happy you make those."

"You are strong, yet you have no mercy. I have no doubt my insane infatuation is nothing to you unless a thing to make merry at."

"Ah! now indeed I know it is you," says Fancy, her manner changing as if by magic, and a warm smile curving her lips. "There is always a healthy glow, a charming amount of candor, about your little speeches, not to be surpassed. I always say you are better than a tonic, and quite as bitter. Yes, I knew you would come even at the last moment. And surely after all you were wise. It pleases me to think you are happier here than you could be elsewhere; and now I am happier too."

"How readily sweet words come to your lips! Yes, it is

quite as well I should be here, for this reason, that absence does me no good. Even when away from you I cannot dis-sever myself from you."

"You cannot 'dissever your soul from the soul of the beautiful Annabel Lee,'" quotes she, gayly. "Well, this Annabel Lee"—laying her hand lightly on her bosom—"rather likes that thought. Come, don't let us quarrel to-night, Arthur. I am in such a pretty temper it is a shame to ruffle it."

"Come into the garden," says Blunden. "This place is stifling: the air outside may change my ugly mood."

The night is heavenly fair. The soft breeze that fans to sleep the drowsy flowers is warm and fragrant. All down the garden-walks and underneath the trees great Chinese lanterns light the way; while above in the thin ethereal blue floats with languid grace

"That orb'd maiden, with white fire laden,
Whom mortals call the moon."

It is a "moon with promise of large light on woods and ways;" and, growing silent beneath its influence or the teaching of their own hearts, they wander past the nearest walks into a garden rich with the fragrance of dropping rose-leaves.

All is quiet. Now and then a faint sobbing note from the band within breaks on the stillness; but as they wander farther even this plaintive sound is lost to them. A merry laugh once stirs their calm, but it too dies away as the owner of it passes onward to the house. The silence is complete. Nothing disturbs it,—

"Save that one rivulet from a tiny cave
Came lightening downward, and so spilt itself
Among the roses, and was lost again."

Her hand, hanging listlessly at her side, touches his. His fingers close upon it, and the mute spell is broken.

"I wonder if you are ever glad to see me?" asks he, bending to read her face.

"Are my eyes so dull, then, that you cannot read them?"

"What am I to understand by that?"

"Anything you like."

"Do you mean what your words imply?"

"I am afraid I do,"—with a would-be sigh but a very lovely smile.

Lifting the hand he has imprisoned, Arthur raises it fondly to his lips.

"You give me hope, that means life," he says, earnestly.

"Yet stay, my friend," murmurs she, withdrawing her hand and glancing at it, as though his caress still rests on it in visible form. "Consider. Is that last of yours an act of friendship? Surely it is too *prononcé*,—too—too—you know what I mean. You amaze me, Arthur, after all your promises. Have you forgotten our compact?"

"There are things one hates to remember. And, besides, just now how can I remember anything beyond the sweet fact that we are together?"

"You are incorrigible," she says, with a swift glance that is hardly cruel. "It is useless my expostulating with you. I fear you are no longer my friend."

"That is true," rejoins he, eagerly: "I can no longer act the part. It is too cold, too meagre. I was mad when I thought (if I ever did think it) that I could sink from being your lover into a conventional well-wisher. Darling, restore me to my old position."

"What was that?—my slave?"

"Something very like it, I fear,"—ruefully.

"But you are that now. So you have the position you crave."

"How heartless you are! I wonder if you ever guess at the millionth part of the misery you make me endure daily?"

"Well, but did I never warn you? Come, confess the truth, now: how often have I told you I am the coldest woman alive?"

"You may have said that, but you have looked the contrary."

"What! the warmest woman alive? How very unbecoming! It reminds me"—with an irresistible laugh—"of one of the children's songs,—something about a lady

'With round cheeks a-glowing,
Like roses all a-blowing.'

I must say you are not very flattering to-night." Her tone tries to be reproachful, but her smile ripens and covers all her face, and, falling into her eyes, lies there wide awake, rendering her more desirable than ever.

"This sort of thing can't go on," says Arthur, with sudden despair. "Fancy, let us be as we were before our one fatal quarrel. Surely I have suffered sufficiently for my sins. Do forgive me and take me back."

"I have forgiven you,"—slowly.

"Then say you love me."

She hesitates.

"Say it," entreats he, standing before her in the path, and taking both her hands.

"Well, then, I do," returns she, in a tone he has never heard her use before, "with all my heart." She throws up her head and looks him fairly, honestly in the eyes. It is a complete surrender. "I love you as I never loved any one before, as I shall never love again. But—if we should fail to make each other happy? It is this thought that haunts me."

"I can answer for myself," says Arthur, with passionate earnestness; "and for you,—let me try what the devotion of my whole life can do."

"Let us have one more trial of our faith first. I am going to Italy with Cyclamen next week,—that is, on Monday,—and I shall probably stay there for three months. During that time you must not write to me or seek in any way to see me; but when I return—if you still care—come to me. We shall both be more certain then, and it is but a day or two out of our lives. Yes, dearest, it is for the best."

"What an interminable time!" groans Arthur, miserably.

"Better than never, surely."

"Yes,"—hastily,—"of course. It shall be as you wish; but at least promise me that when this eternity is at an end you will not keep me longer waiting: you will then marry me."

"If you are faithful, yes."

They have turned into another path, and plainly there is no one in sight. A little misty veil has arisen and hangs between heaven and earth.

"May I kiss you—now?" asks Arthur, deferentially, being mindful of a past hour, during their first engagement, when he had barely escaped annihilation for stealing a caress without permission.

"If you compel me to answer that question, I suppose

"I must say no," whispers she, half shyly, half playfully. She shrinks a little from him and blushes warmly,—not an unbecoming or a vehement color, but a faint rosebud of a blush, that conveys all the sweetness of confusion without any of the *gaucherie* that unhappily, as a rule, belongs to it.

"Then suppress that hateful word, and yet let me take the answer I would have from your lips," says Arthur, fondly, and, stooping, kisses her twice unrebuked. Nay, more, I think one if not both of those kisses is softly returned!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"Oh, break, my heart!—poor bankrupt, break at once."

BUT had they "wist before they kist" that their innocent embrace would cause all the mischief that followed on it, I believe they would both, even at that supreme moment (to their credit be it recorded), have put off the caress to an indefinite period.

To return to Kitty.

Firmly impressed with the belief that Arthur is in reality her husband,—so strongly does he resemble him in his present costume,—she watches his every movement with a feverish anxiety that kills all enjoyment of the charming scene before her. Her eyes, filled with agonized doubt, follow him from place to place, and when he disappears from the ball-room during his *tête-à-tête* with Fancy she grows restless and unhappy,—so gnawing a thing is jealousy, so engrossing, so base.

Half through a desire to gain some air to cool her aching forehead, and half through a hope that in the gardens she may again meet the gray domino, she lets her partner—a dear grizzled old general, all covered with medals and the melancholy remains of what must have been virulent small-pox—lead her on to the veranda and into the quiet night.

Her heart is so full that ordinary converse is impossible to her; and presently, under a pretext that she is chilly, she

sends her companion in-doors again in search of some covering. The gallant old warrior, returning with a shock from Cawnpore, where he has been revelling in ghostly recollections, flies to do her bidding, whereupon Kitty,—who has been wishing him among the massacred ones for some time past,—with a sigh of petulant exhaustion, sinks into a garden-chair, and covers her face with her hands.

Her thoughts are almost unbearable; but presently the noise of slowly-approaching footsteps, the sound of a voice only too familiar, only too detested, bring her back to the passing moment. Raising her head, she leans a little forward and looks straight before her.

On the path, some yards from her, walk two people, evidently in close and earnest conversation. Her heart almost stops beating, as on one of them she recognizes the gray domino with the quaint device worked upon the shoulder. It is impossible to mistake it for any other. Only last week she had seen it, and had stayed to examine the strange crimson cross that adorned it. Just now the cross is gleaming blood-red in the light of a Chinese lantern that, concealed in a shrub close by, flings out its rays upon those who chance to pass.

Impossible, too, to believe herself mistaken in that tall, handsome figure, the well-shaped head, the rather square cheek and chin.

It is Sir John beyond all doubt, and by his side is Fancy Charteris.

In her passionate rage and despair she starts to her feet, hardly knowing what it is she means to do. Unfortunately, she does nothing. At the moment when she sees the next turn will hide them from her view, and has almost made up her mind to follow them at every risk, and end forever, one way or the other, the doubts that distract her, the two on whom her gaze is centred stop suddenly, and the gray domino, placing his arm gently but lovingly round the waist of the pale-blue domino, bends his face to hers. There is some faint but unmistakable hesitation on the part of the latter,—a short demur,—and then—their lips meet.

Kitty closes her eyes, and a long, gasping sob, filled with that acutest of all agonies, despair, escapes her. Involuntarily she lifts her hand and presses it convulsively against her

heart, as though to still the pang that threatens to annihilate her. Her very lips are ashen. For one terrible moment she fears she is going to faint. Then, by a supreme effort, bringing herself back to life again, she once more (with that strange longing to know the worst so common to all humanity) turns her head in the direction from whence she has received her death-wound.

They are still in sight. The gray domino has removed his arm, and is now speaking rapidly and with apparent entreaty. The soft silvery veil of mist still hangs upon the air, rendering all things indistinct; but as Kitty gazes, trying to pierce the gloom, a sweet, low, musical laugh comes to her. She grows, if possible, a shade paler, yet the sound of mirth restores her to some kind of composure. They can jest, then, while her heart is breaking! She draws herself to her full height, and, forgetful of her partner, the desired shawl, everything, returns to the house.

Just inside the conservatory door she encounters Cyclamen, who is unmasked and is looking rather tired.

"I am going home, dear," she says, as if in explanation to Kitty. "Olive looked a little feverish, I thought, when leaving,—nothing to signify, you know; but, now I have seen this fancy fair, I shall return to her. Have you enjoyed yourself?"

"Immensely!"—in a quick, hard voice. "I cannot possibly describe to you how much: you might say I exaggerated." She removes her own mask as she speaks, and flings it from her impatiently, and sighs as one might just released from suffocation. "It is all charming," she goes on, speaking fast, as though fearing silence; "and I have been so amused just now watching Sir John in the garden,—or rather in the path leading to it."

"But I thought you told me, dear, he wasn't coming?" says Cyclamen, impulsively.

"So I did. No doubt he altered his mind, intending to give me a pleasant surprise. He has succeeded. But perhaps I found him out too soon. That always spoils a jest, does it not?" She laughs recklessly.

"But I think," says Cyclamen, smiling too, out of courtesy, though her heart misgives her for her friend, "you must have been mistaken. Sir John I am sure is not here to-night."

If he had been, he would have claimed my hand for the third waltz, for which he asked me."

"Couldn't find you, probably. You look so different when masked. He is here, at all events. I knew him, not only by the cross upon his shoulder, but by the little true-lover's knot I myself worked upon his sleeve. He made me do it one night in Italy, lest I should miss him at some ball to which we were going. You see, crosses are so common on dominos there, they scarcely make a distinction." She laughs again, this time with great bitterness. "What a devoted couple we were, were we not? And how the devotion has lasted! However, that little tender mark on the sleeve was a happy thought; it enabled me to know him to-night."

"Still," says Cyclamen, very gently, though with an assumption of gayety, feeling all the delicacy of the situation, "in spite of laying myself open to the charge of obstinacy, I yet think you must be mistaken."

"May I not be allowed to know my own husband?" says Kitty, with a vivacity that borders on anger. "He was out there a moment since; he is there still, walking with——"

At this instant Cyclamen, with great presence of mind, starts back with a little cry from the plant she has been pretending to examine.

"How it hurts, the cruel thing!" she says, plaintively. "It has pricked my finger. Do you know, Kitty, in spite of all the loveliness around me I grow wearied? And I am rather anxious about my Olive. Do not laugh at me if I tell you I shall go home directly to sit beside her bed and see that her sleep is sound."

"Laugh at you! I?" says Lady Blunden, in a low tone. "Oh, no! I should be the last to laugh at you. Surely you are greatly blessed in the certainty that the one thing you love loves you. I may envy you; I could not laugh at you."

"You look tired yourself, dear. Come home with me."

"I should like to; but——"

"This is our dance, I think, Lady Blunden," says Launceston at this moment, appearing from no one knows where. "We are fortunate. *Mon Rêve* is your favorite waltz, I think?"

"Is it?" says Kitty. "'A dreamer of dreams,'—that is

what I have been for very long, it seems to me. Yet now that I am awake am I any the happier? Our dance, did you say, Mr. Launceston? I had forgotten it; and now I have almost promised to go home with Lady Cyclamen."

"Not so soon, surely?" says Launceston, betraying his dismay and disappointment, not with vulgar ostentation, but with consummate skill. "I have been looking forward to this dance all night,—nay, for a whole fortnight; and now just as the cup is at my lips you dash it away."

"What shall I say, Cyclamen?" says Kitty, languidly.

Cyclamen regards her earnestly with a glance full of scrutiny. She marks the brilliant spots that burn upon her cheeks, the curious gleam in her dark eyes, the almost reckless carelessness of her manner.

"Come with me," she says, quietly but persuasively. "You have been out too much of late, and you are overdoing it. Health is not a thing to be trifled with."

"But this one dance,—it cannot harm you much," entreats Launceston, eagerly.

"It is always the one rock more that wrecks the ship," says Cyclamen, calmly. "Will you see us to our carriage, Cecil?"

He is quite old friends with Lady Cyclamen.

"How difficult it is to decide!" says Kitty, as though wavering, and turning a bewildering glance on the devoted Launceston. "How charming it would be to have some one at one's elbow to say 'Yes' or 'No' for one!"

"Let me be that 'some one,'" says Launceston, "and I shall say——"

"Order the carriage," puts in Cyclamen, who is a little afraid for Kitty in her present mood.

"Cyclamen is always right," says Kitty; but she lays her hand on Launceston's arm.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

DUCH. "I prythee hear me speak."

K. RICH. "You speak too bitterly."

DUCH. "Hear me a word :

For I shall never speak to thee again."

K. RICH. "So!"—*Richard III.*

NEXT morning Sir John, meeting Minton in the hall, says, pleasantly, "My love to Lady Blunden, and ask if I can see her for a few minutes."

"Her ladyship did not sleep at home at all last night, Sir John," says Miss Minton, with a keen relish for the situation. But Sir John is not the one to be bowled over by a waiting-maid: he says, "Oh! very well: it doesn't matter," in his most indifferent manner, and, going into the library, closes the door.

"No wonder she 'ave sloped" (I suppose she means eloped), "poor dear," says Miss Minton, with a sniff. "He don't care a pin about her, no more than a houter barbarian, that's my opingion. Men as a rule is dëad to all decency, but sich barefaced hindifference I never see."

But could she have looked into the library I think she would have changed her "opingion" about the indifference. Sir John, having turned the key in the library door, walks over to one of the windows, and there, with his hands behind his back, deliberately reviews the case. All last night her words rang in his ears, destroying sleep: "If harm comes of it, blame yourself." She had said it was not a threat; but where then is she? In all their short married life never before has she slept from under his roof.

A horrible fear possesses him, a terror that almost maddens him, as he stands thus gazing vacantly upon the summer sky. He does not move or gesticulate; his face perhaps is troubled, but his attitude might be mistaken for one of extreme repose, so quiet is he, so motionless. I do not think in moments of intense agony, that is of mind, when one is most distraught with fear or horror, that the body asserts itself in any way.

In most cases I have witnessed I have noticed that the mind, being uppermost, subdues the body to itself, and a total quiescence of the limbs is the result. I never saw any one wring their hands, or throw their arms above their heads, or beat their breasts; but, happily, my experience is limited, and I may be wrong.

Sir John, at least, though filled with a sickening dread, makes no outward moan. Kitty's face rises before him in all its anger of the night before, its reproach, its excessive beauty; and then, strangely enough, another face rises beside it, taking the features of Launceston.

He straightens himself at this moment, and raises his head. In his usually laughing eyes there is an expression foreign to them, an unpleasant expression,—one almost murderous. Then it fades, his thoughts change, and a low laugh, that is half a sigh of relief, escapes him. What a fool he has been! What mad fears have been coursing through his brain. A sleepless night always plays the mischief with a fellow's intellect! Of course she is with Laura Redesdale or Cyclamen. No doubt, foolish child, she has hoped to frighten him into a better temper by this momentary desertion. Well, she has succeeded: when he meets her he will beg her pardon for his detestable conduct of the night before; and—who knows?—perhaps—perhaps things will clear up, you know, and look brighter in the future.

Without further hesitation he leaves the room, finds his hat, and, going out of the house, hails a hansom and drives to Mrs. Redesdale's residence.

"Is Mrs. Redesdale at home?"

Mrs. Redesdale has left town; went to the country day before yesterday; won't be back again for four days.

At this his fierce determination to believe only the best deserts him. It is only a slight check, surely, as Cyclamen's home still lies unquestioned, yet on the instant all hope dies. One disappointment makes three. A horrible feeling of superstition chills him and takes complete possession of him. He feels, not faint, but utterly worn out,—as tired as though all day and night he had been dragging his limbs through interminable marshes and dense thickets. He is so imbued with the belief that his wife is not with Cyclamen that when he reaches the latter's house, and is admitted, he goes linger-

ingly, with slow unwilling steps, up the stairs, pausing at every turn, as though to stave off the evil hour that shall tell him he must go forth on a new quest.

The man throws open the door of a small drawing-room, and Sir John, entering, is well in it, and half-way up the room, before he recognizes, at the other end, his wife.

She is dressed in a loose morning robe of Cyclamen's, composed of cardinal and black satin, that suits her to perfection, and is just now staring at Sir John with cold surprise and haughty contempt.

Still with his evil thoughts of a moment since full upon him, he advances towards her and lays his hand upon her wrist.

"Where were you last night?" he asks, all the terrible anxiety and suspense of the past hour rendering his voice harsh and masterful.

Kitty neither stirs her hand nor removes her eyes from his; scorn and detestation declare themselves in every line of her handsome face.

"Where were you?" repeats he, his eyes flashing, his face as white as death.

"Let my hand go," says Kitty, in a low, dangerous tone. And then she wrenches it free, and moves back a step or two. "What do you mean? What have you been thinking?" she asks, her breath coming a little quickly.

"What I have said. I insist on knowing where you were last night." Only that he has lost his head, he would perhaps have seen the utter folly of the question, her presence where she is being sufficient answer. But it is too late to retract the fatal insinuation.

"It is impossible to misunderstand you; but what a question from you to me!" she says, almost in a whisper, a look of agonized shame creeping into her large, expressive eyes. "You insist upon knowing. Why should you imagine me unwilling to satisfy you on such a simple matter? Of what have you been accusing me in your thoughts, Sir John? You to accuse me!" She laughs a short, unlovely laugh, and, with a quick movement, raises her hand to her throat. "You say you insist. Well, for the last time then, your commands shall be obeyed. I spent last night here with Cyclamen, tending her sick child."

"Here? And why did you not return home?"

"To Belgrave Square?"—with indescribable bitterness. "Because I did not choose to do so. Because the place has grown hateful to me, and I was glad of any chance that kept me a few hours from it. Do you still doubt? You can ask Cyclamen, you know; or perhaps her-maid, or the footman, or the butler, will be the most orthodox person to examine in a case like this."

He is silent. Her whole manner is so dignified, so majestic, yet so replete with contemptuous scorn, that slowly his senses have returned to him. Relief and shame fight within him for mastery.

"It is time this wretched farce came to an end," goes on Kitty, quietly, though the hands that hang on either side of her are so tightly clenched that the nails are snow-white. "I, for one, refuse any longer to hold up the thin veil of would-be friendliness behind which we vainly hope to hide our discomfort from our friends. I care no longer what they think or see. I shall never again live beneath your roof. You have won your game. For the future you may enjoy life as you please, without the constraint of a wife's presence. It was a wise thought to accuse me of—of——"

She pauses, and covers her face with her hands to shut out the cruel vivid blush that has dyed it.

"I never accused you," begins Sir John, unsteadily, who has grown pale as one struck by a mortal blow.

"Not in words, but your look and your tone were eloquent. Both were a deliberate insult. And you,—you," she cries, with sudden passion, turning upon him her magnificent eyes that literally blaze with anger long subdued, while her cheeks, losing their pallor in the excitement of the moment, deepen in color to a rich carmine,—“you to find fault with my conduct after all that has happened, after all I have silently endured for months,—with the remembrance of last night still fresh upon my mind! When I tell you I saw you in the gardens——"

"Last night you saw me where?" interrupts he, in amazement.

"Nay, no lies, no excuses," returns she, contemptuously: "they are worse than useless in this case, and only help to heighten disgust."

He flushes darkly.

"You forget yourself," he says, coldly. "I am not a liar; and you must permit me to say I do not understand in the least what you mean."

"It is foolish prolonging this interview," says Kitty, calmly, her passion dying away, and the cold quiet of her first demeanor returning to her. "The sooner it terminates, the better. I suppose I must ask you to allow me still the—the money you agreed to let me have yearly when I married you?"

"Certainly,"—very politely. "You must, however, allow me to treble the amount for the future."

"There will be no necessity, I think, to see you again. Any other arrangements that must be made can be managed through your lawyer."

"As you wish. May I ask where you intend going?"

"For the present, to Gretchen. Afterwards, where chance may take me."

"I cannot agree to that. However little I may be to you, still, I could not think of you as without a settled home. There is that place in Derbyshire: I never go there; I shall see that it is made comfortable for you."

"Very well."

"You have nothing more to say?"

"Nothing."

"Then now listen to me," says Blunden, going up to her, and taking both her hands,—even at this instant their icy coldness makes him shiver: "this step you are about to take will be, I warn you, a final one. Never, after this, shall I willingly see or speak to you again. It is your own arrangement from first to last; I have had neither hand, act, nor part in it. Once you separate from me, it must be forever!"

"Forever; that means always," says Kitty, dreamily, yet with an exceedingly bitter smile. "It means that I shall never again suffer anguish and mortification at your hands at least. 'Forever;' a good word!"

"You have quite decided?"

"Quite."

"This is our last farewell?" His tone is full of passionate entreaty; one word, one glance, and he would have been at her feet.

"I hope so!" returns she, steadily, but with lips so pale that the blood seems as though it has died away from them never to return.

Dropping her hands hastily, as though stung by her last speech, Sir John walks deliberately to the door, opens it, hesitates plainly for a moment; another, and he has gone.

Kitty, putting out her hand vaguely, touches a chair near her, and sinks into it with a long-drawn feeble sigh. It is all over. She has seen him for the last time. Her very life is at an end!

* * * * *

"Here still, dear?" says Cyclamen, entering quickly. "Why, Kitty, darling, how pale you look! Anything wrong with you?"

"Nothing; I have not been well for some time. I shall go down to Gretchen for change of air. I was always well and happy when at home."

"Sir John was here?"

"Yes."

"Kitty," says Cyclamen, impulsively, "be angry with me if you will, but I must say what is on my mind. I am sure there is something not altogether right between you and Sir John."

"Only a mere trifle; nothing worth recording," says Kitty, with a heart-broken smile. "He has ceased to love me. After all, you were right, Cyclamen, and my argument falls to the ground. At the end of six months or so a man does prefer some other man's wife to his own."

"This is madness," says Cyclamen, in a frightened tone. "I will not listen to you. Things may have gone a little crooked with you lately, but I am positive Sir John adores you."

"Then he must be enduring torments now; because we have agreed to separate."

"It is shocking!—horrible! Can I do nothing?" says poor Cyclamen, in a distracted tone. "To have this happen to you of all people! How distressed Mrs. Dugdale will be!"

"Yes; I wish I had not got to tell Gretchen: that will be very hard," says Kitty, mournfully. "Her eyes will reproach me, though she will say nothing."

"Can you not think it over? It can't be anything so very

bad,"—earnestly. "Do not be hasty, Kitty: an impulsive step of this kind may spoil two lives. Think it over."

"It is too late," says Kitty, wearily.

"Then at least promise me to keep your own counsel. Tell no one what has occurred, and go down this very evening to Laxton. The less you say now, the less you will have to say afterwards when—when you and Sir John beg each other's pardon."

"That will never be. We have parted forever. Those were his own words,—'for ever.'"

"Oh, a fig for his words!" says Lady Cyclamen, with more force than elegance, and a fine show of indignation.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"My head is wild with weeping for a grief."—SHELLEY.

As evening begins to fall, and twilight deepens, Kitty reaches Laxton, and, passing into the house and up the stairs, stops at the door of the little blue-and-silver nest that Gretchen claims as her own especial property. Dismissing the man, who would have announced her, with a slight gesture, she opens the door, and, entering, closes it carefully behind her.

"Well, I have come," she says, in a hard voice, addressing Gretchen, who is sitting in a low chair before a little cosy chattering fire. Sighing heavily, she sinks upon a lounge near her.

She is looking pale and worn. Her large dark eyes seem more sombre than ever; deep circles lie beneath them; her lips have lost all color; her whole air is melancholy, yet not forlorn, being sustained by a certain amount of pride.

Gretchen, rising, runs to her.

"My darling girl," cries she, "what a delicious surprise! How more than glad I am to see you! But how ill you look!" And she would have embraced her, but Kitty holds her back. Misfortune and fatigue have so far blunted her perception

that she has magnified her unhappy position to such an extent as makes her believe herself at this moment an outcast from society.

"Not yet," she says. "Wait until I have explained what has brought me, and then you may kiss me,—if you will."

"I don't care what you have to tell me," says warm-hearted Gretchen; "I only see you are unhappy, and that is enough for me. What has happened, Kitty? Is Jack well?"

"I don't know."

"Not know, dear! Did you not see him to-day?"

"Yes, this morning,—for the last time. The worst has come, Gretchen. The play is played out, and the curtain has fallen. We have agreed to separate."

"Oh, no! not that!" says Gretchen, growing pale. "It can't be true. There is surely some mistake."

"Our whole lives are a mistake; but it is all quite true. I have left him. I shall never return,—never; nor will he seek me. If you don't mind harboring a woman in my position, I should like to stay here with you for a little while."

"I can hardly understand, it all sounds so horrible,—like a bad dream," says Gretchen, in her dismay not heeding the last remark. "Can nothing be done?"

"Nothing!"—starting to her feet, her face dark with impatience. "Would I speak of it, even to you, if it were not past remedy? The world must now judge between him and me; and as for that, I sha'n't be spared, of course: in all such cases the woman goes to the wall. Not that I care for that, either: I don't care for anything, I think,"—recklessly. "I dare say people will look coldly upon me, and say hard things of me, and pity 'that poor Sir John.' Why, even you,—you are slow to answer my question, if I may stay with you for a little while."

"Darling, you are overwrought," says Gretchen, tenderly. "I thought it unnecessary to explain that at all times, and under all circumstances, my home is yours. Sit down again,"—taking her hand and leading her to a couch,— "and tell me all about it; it will do you good. But, first, what have you eaten to-day?"

"Nothing. How could I eat? I feel no desire for food. And my brain seems on fire, and my heart as cold as ice. I

suppose this is how poor souls go mad at times. No, do not order anything for me, Gretchen. I could not take it, indeed."

"But that is nonsense, and I insist on your eating something directly," says Gretchen, with authority, ringing the bell. "Fasting all day, letting body and mind wear themselves out together! I shall not hear of it. Why, you are positively weak from hunger."

"I am not. I think I must be the strongest woman alive not to have died long ago from grief, and pain, and shame." She leans back and closes her eyes, being plainly exhausted in spite of her assertion to the contrary. And Gretchen, having given an order to a servant in a low voice, presently makes her eat a little and drink some wine; after which, divesting her of her bonnet and laces, she draws a comfortable chair to the fire and places her in it.

"Now let me hear everything," she says, lovingly; whereupon Kitty relates to her the whole sad story from start to finish,—of the flowers sent by Launceston, and Sir John's refusal to accompany her to Lady Monckton's consequent on her acceptance of them, of her discovery in the gardens at Twickenham, and finally of their last meeting, his base accusation, and their final farewell.

"You are quite sure you could not have been mistaken?" asks Gretchen, musingly, when the recital is at an end, alluding to the scene in the garden.

"Impossible. Her laugh is unmistakable; and then his domino. The cross upon the shoulder would alone have been sufficient to betray him, but the love-knot worked upon the sleeve was surely 'confirmation strong.' And the night was as clear as day, and lanterns burning brightly. Besides, I am not an imaginative person."

"How difficult it is to know any one!" Gretchen says, sadly. "And Jack, of all men. I believed him such a dear, kind-hearted, affectionate fellow! I should have trusted him almost as I trust you."

"What seems to me worse than all the rest," says Kitty, slowly, "was his pretending that night he would not go to Twickenham. He must have intended to go all along, but wished to go alone. There was something so contemptible in his making my acceptance of Launceston's flowers an excuse for refusing to accompany me. It was so unworthy. I

thought him reckless, careless in many ways, but deceitful never."

"I wish those flowers had not been sent," says Gretchen, softly.

"On the contrary, I am very glad they were. They opened my eyes to what I only guessed at before. Why should I remain in ignorance of what perhaps the whole world knew?"

"It is a sad story," says Gretchen, with a heavy sigh. "Such a dark ending to what appeared such a bright beginning."

"Did it appear bright? I think almost at the very first I doubted his love for me. With such a doubt on my mind I should never have married him. But—I loved him."

"And he loved you," says Gretchen, with conviction: "in that I know I am not mistaken."

There is a pause, a lengthened silence. A few loose cinders fall with a little tinkling clatter into the ashes; the night-wind without is rising angrily.

"You think I did wrong when I defied him about those flowers?" says Kitty, presently, in a subdued tone.

"It is not well to defy any one, dearest. It is better to give in, in most cases, unless it is against one's conscience. I wish you had never seen Mr. Launceston. I wish, darling,—forgive me,—you had not seemed to take such pleasure in his society."

"It was the baldest seeming. I don't even like him, and now I think I hate him. I look upon him as an insufferable prig, and very stupid. He could not even amuse me: his vapid conversation at times positively sickened me. But I saw it vexed Sir John to see him constantly with me, and I could not resist the temptation to secure revenge in some way. You condemn me, Gretchen. It is only natural you should. Such evil behavior would be utterly impossible to you. Yet, remember, you have never been tried as I have been."

"That is true. It is always so easy to preach to others, so difficult to follow the straight path," says Gretchen, with sweet charity. "And how can I be sure that if placed in similar circumstances I should not act in like manner myself? Indeed, the more I think of it, the more convinced I feel I should have done just as you did."

"No, you would not. You would have endured nobly, and broken your heart in silence. My heart is broken too," says poor Kitty, covering her face with her hands; "but storms have shattered it."

The tears fall through her fingers, and splash and sparkle on her silk gown in the flickering firelight, though no sob escapes her. Noisy grief would be impossible to one of her calibre. Gretchen in her heart is glad to see these healing tears, though bitterly distressed, and, winding her arms round her, cries too, through very sympathy.

After a little while Kitty checks her grief, and, still with one arm round Gretchen's neck, who kneels beside her, gazes moodily into the fire.

The evening, though still belonging to July, is cold, and comfortless, and stormy. Outside the rain is drifting, sometimes dashing itself with petulant violence against the window-panes. The wind is sighing through the huge elms in the avenue, and moaning down the corridors. Gretchen, listening to it, shivers, and draws even nearer to her sister.

"There is something else I must tell you," says Kitty, slowly,—*"something I have never yet told to human being."*

Gretchen, lifting her head expectantly at these strange words, uttered in a tone and manner both solemn and hesitating, sees the pallor has disappeared from Kitty's cheeks, and that a bright warm flush has taken its place.

"It is a secret,—a great secret," goes on Kitty: "you will keep it?"

She turns her head for a moment, and lets her eyes rest on Gretchen's. Only for a moment; and yet in that short space of time Gretchen sees in them a light new and undefined,—a wonderful light of deep joy and deep regret, and a love so infinite as to overpower all else.

Gretchen, grown silent beneath the magic of this strange glance, stays silent, waiting for what is yet to come.

"Can you not guess?" says Kitty, with a trembling smile, turning a swift side-glance upon her. Now, what there could have been in this glance and smile, or in the very vague words that preceded them, to make things clear to Gretchen, I know not, but she seems all at once in full possession of the mighty secret, and, rising impetuously, clasps Kitty round the neck.

"Oh, Kitty, not that!—you don't mean that?" she says, incoherently. But evidently Kitty sees lucidity even in this impossible speech, and replies to it instantly without betraying the least sign of bewilderment.

"Yes, that is what I do mean," she says, with quivering lips.

"Oh! how delightful!—how charming!" says Gretchen, rapturously, dimpling with unaffected pleasure. "I never heard anything so sweet in all my life. I am so glad!"

"Are you?"—wistfully, something that is like anguish in her expression. "I used to be; now I hardly know whether I am intensely glad or bitterly sorry."

"If you had seen your own eyes a moment since, you would know," says Gretchen. "Of course you are happy about it, darling, and something tells me there is great joy in store for you yet. Oh, Kitty, this is indeed a secret!"

And then the two girls fall into each other's arms, and have quite a splendid time for several minutes,—that is, a right good cry.

Though what they are crying about, and why Gretchen should be so pleased, I cannot tell you, as no intelligible explanation ever follows.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"Should we be taking leave
As long a term as yet we have to live,
The loathness to depart would grow. Adieu."
Cymbeline.

"How many fond fools serve mad jealousy!"
Comedy of Errors.

SUMMER is over and autumn well begun, and all the world is scattered. Kitty remains *perdu* at Laxton, where she is popularly supposed to be lavishing devoted care upon the sister who in reality is striving to heal and restore her broken spirit with ineffable tenderness.

Lady Cyclamen and Fancy Charteris are travelling lazily

towards Italy; Arthur has gone north for some shooting, and Sir John has disappeared in his yacht no one knows whither. No friend has accompanied him, no word of explanation passed his lips before his departure; indeed, he gave himself time for none, as he quitted London in angry haste two days after his final interview with Kitty.

Perhaps, had the faintest hint of the real facts of the case entered into Cyclamen's brain, had she honestly doubted Sir John's presence at Lady Monckton's ball, or known anything about the transfer of the luckless domino, or imagined for an instant that it was her cousin Fancy whom Kitty believed to be in the gardens with her husband, all might yet have been well. But a sense of delicacy had prevented her that night at Twickenham from listening to Lady Blunden when she would have betrayed to her the fear that lay heavy at her heart. She shrank from the thought that words uttered in a moment of passionate pain and indignation might be bitterly repented of in the more sober light of morning.

That Kitty was unhappy in the thought that some one had come between her and her husband's love she firmly believed; but she also believed the thought unworthy and utterly unfounded, based on some foolish suspicion, having had a long acquaintance with Sir John, and being inwardly positive that he was the last man in the world to play fast and loose with the woman he loved.

Unfortunately, therefore, she had turned a deaf ear to Kitty's outburst, and the opportunity had passed, and she had never learned that it was Fancy to whom Lady Blunden would have alluded. Had she investigated matters there would probably have been explanations all round, and a reconciliation might have been effected, and this book would have been much shorter: so that on the whole I am, perhaps, devoutly thankful to Lady Cyclamen that she abstained from idle questioning.

Thinking and hoping that the whole affair would after a little while die a natural death from want of nourishment, and that Sir John and Kitty would gladly agree to forget and forgive old scores, and run to meet each other again with tears and kisses, she had made up her mind to maintain a rigid silence on the subject even towards Fancy. Another unfortunate resolution, as had she opened her heart to that

charming if slightly anomalous person she might have found herself considerably enlightened about many things.

The parting between Arthur Blunden and the latter was highly characteristic of both.

The last moment had arrived: separation was inevitable. They were standing in the centre of the drawing-room, he full of melancholy and unconcealed regret, she clad in the most becoming and *recherché* of costumes, and (in spite of her real sorrow at parting from him, or because of it) in one of her most recklessly mischievous moods.

"What shall I do if you forget me?" asks Blunden, in the dolorous tone of one who anticipates the worst and has not made up his mind to endure it patiently.

"You have put it out of my power to do that," returns she, with a pleased glance at a large locket that lies on her neck, and in which reposes an elaborate portrait of Mr. Blunden, taken when at his ugliest. He had sat for it as a parting gift to his beloved, and, filled with the thought that he is to lose her on the presentment of it, had covered himself with his most dismal expression.

A woman under similar circumstances would undoubtedly have looked out some old picture in which she looked her brightest and daintiest, fearful lest, if she put him in possession of one less flattering, distance, which always deadens memory, might bring him to believe the unpleasing portrait a truthful one. And in this she would be right: for though women when they love a man will cling to him always, be he at his worst or best, men—well, I won't be too hard, but I think beauty goes a long way with them.

"I didn't mean that," says Blunden, anxiously. "But you won't forget the promise you made me, will you?"

"Promise!"—with a charming air of surprise. "Did I make you a promise?"

"Don't you know you did?"—reproachfully.

"Do I? But when did I make it, or where?"

"At Lady Monckton's, the other night. Don't look"—impatiently—"as if you never heard of Lady Monckton. It was at Twickenham, in the garden, you remember?"

"What a wretched memory I have, to be sure!" says Fancy, putting both her hands to her head in a distracted fashion, as though she would give worlds to remember, but can't.

"You promised to marry me on your return from Italy."

"Did I say that? Are you sure? It does sound so unlike me! I'm sure I hope you have made no mistake. You see, I never took my mask off all that evening, and really people when masked are so alike. My dear Arthur, are you absolutely certain it was me you were talking to?"

"Absolutely certain,"—with increasing indignation, mingled with uneasiness. "Is it likely I should mistake you if you wore a hundred masks?"

"Well, it is very curious my having no recollection of— Oh, Arthur! I do hope you did not propose to somebody else that evening. Think how awkward it would be. You know I am always telling you. You are so very careless."

"Nonsense!"—roughly. "If you mean to break your word, say so; but don't pretend ignorance of what you must remember."

"Oh, no, not that. If you are indeed positive it was me, and that I did make you that promise, of course I shall feel bound in honor to fulfil it."

"I could not possibly be more positive."

"Very well, then. It has arranged itself. And I shall marry you on my return from Naples, if all goes well," returns she, in the most cheerful matter-of-fact tone possible. "But I hope there won't be complications, and a second bride for you to settle with on our wedding morning."

Here her lips part, and a smile comes slowly into her eyes, and two little wicked dimples betray themselves at the corners of her mouth, and finally Beauty breaks into a delicious silvery peal of laughter.

Presently, but rather ungraciously, as though under protest, Blunden laughs too, and lays his hands lightly on her shoulders.

"There are moments," he says, threateningly, "when I feel I could sacrifice a great deal to give you a good shake."

"Well,"—provokingly,—"but how much? I don't like vague speeches. If you named anything very pretty, and I thought it might please you, perhaps I should let you."

"What an honest delight you take in teasing me!"

"And what a delightful person you are to tease! You are always so deliciously in earnest. We ought to be happy, Arthur, if it is true that extremes meet and—sympathize."

"Yet when you leave me,"—rather sadly, almost wistfully,—"you will, perhaps, say to yourself, 'He was a dull fellow, whose only merit lay in the fact that he loved me.' You can say that, Fancy, at least."

"You are not dull," retorts she, quickly. "The thought is an insult to myself. What! should I—should I—love you" with an adorable smile—"if you were? No, you are my Prince Charming, and I shall never dethrone you. And—are you listening, Arthur?—I shall not look at any one while I am away from you. There! And if any one looks at me I shall be downright rude to them. There! And I shall eat and sleep and think and walk and live for you alone. There!"

She has her fingers intertwined behind his neck, and as she finishes this eminently satisfactory speech she presses her lips to his gently but warmly. It is the very first time she has ever kissed him of her own sweet accord, and the soft caress fills him with rapture.

"My angel!" he whispers (very mistakenly), with all the effusiveness of a fond lover.

"Are my wings growing, then?" demands she, brightly, in a pleased tone, there being no term of endearment too extravagant for a woman's vanity. And then there is a pause, —a happy one,—during which he grows so content that presently she tells herself it is her distinct duty to turn his thoughts into other and more conflicting channels.

Letting her fingers wander, as though oppressed with shyness, over the buttons of his coat, she says, in a low hesitating voice, and with carefully hidden eyes,—

"Arthur?"

"Darling."

"I want to say something."

"Then say it, my own."

"But I am half afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Of you."

"Of me? Oh, Fancy!"

"Yes, just fancy it! Will you make me a promise now?"

"Anything,—to the half of my kingdom."

"Why not the whole of it?"

"Well, the whole of it, then."

"I am very unhappy."

"My dearest, about what?"—with unmistakable signs of distress in tone and manner.

"There is one reason why I am specially sorry to part from you just now."

"And there are a thousand reasons why I am sorry to part from you."

"But mine is such a weighty one."

"Then let me share it. Tell me what troubles you, and perhaps I can help you."

"Then promise you will not flirt with Ethel Steyne while I am away, or let her teach you to forget me," entreats this wicked hypocrite, in the most miserable of tones, turning her face away so that he cannot see it. There is the faintest possible movement of her shoulders. Can she be in tears? Oh, horror!

"Fancy, how can you be so absurd?" says Blunden, in an agony. "Do you think a man who had once loved you could ever love another? And that Steyne girl of all others! Why, she is not fit to be named in the same day with you. What is the matter with you? Are you crying?"

"No, I am only feeling slightly hysterical," says Fancy, in a choked voice. "Oh, you can't think what a load you have lifted from my heart. I am so jealous of Ethel Steyne." At this she turns up to his two blue eyes full of tears from suppressed laughter.

"You look it," says Arthur, with much disgust. "What a consummate little actress you are! Fancy, look here: you owe me something for all this. Let me write to you; will you?"

"Certainly not."

"But why?"

"Because foreign postage is so heavy; and I cannot encourage reckless extravagance."

"I like that," says Mr. Blunden. "Won't you tell me why, then?"

"Because I have already said you should not. And you would not have me break my word, would you? If I broke it in one instance I might break it in all, and——"

"Oh, well, then, don't," says Arthur, who dreads the awful hint conveyed in these words.

"And now I'm afraid you must go," says Fancy, reluctantly. "I shall be late for my train, and Cyclamen will never forgive me."

"May I not go to the train to see the last of you?"

"Oh, indeed, no. I can't bear partings at trains. They are so cold, so formal, and one is so afraid to look what one really feels; and I know there would be some one in the opposite seat trying not to stare, and making a foolish effort to appear quite deaf, whilst wondering all the time whether I was your 'sister, or your cousin, or your aunt.' No, let us say good-by here, and let us think of the time when—when——"

"What, my darling?"

"We shall never have to part again," whispers she, with quivering lips, large tears glistening in her uplifted eyes.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"My fair son,
My life, my joy, my food, my all the world."

"TEMPUS FUGIT." If Solomon be right, and there is indeed a time for everything, there is surely a time to rejoice as well as a time to mourn over this truism,—to mourn when good days come to an unfruitful end, to rejoice when in the dim future happiness may loom. To Kitty alone, perhaps, the thought brings neither pain nor pleasure. It is a matter of indifference to her whether the hours haste or tarry.

Sunny August and golden September have fled, and October reigns,—bleak month, full of sad thoughts, ushered in by blinding rain and passionate storm.

To-day the wind is dancing mad dances round the chimney-pots and gables of Laxton, drowning the song of birds, dashing itself wildly against window-panes, rushing through shrubberies and across lawns, to pass on with an angry shriek through the gaunt trees that grow each minute more naked beneath its rude touch.

The leaves from the avenue are drifting helplessly hither and thither, falling thick as snow-flakes, and glancing forlornly in at drawing-room and boudoir, as though to crave some sympathy for their untimely fate.

The sky is gray and overcast. The earth is a dull green. Nature has ceased to be mirthful. Below in the bay, the ocean, full of furious rage, dashes itself against rock and boulder, whilst ever and anon the noise of its wrath, creeping up from the harbor bar, overwhelms and puts to silence the wild laughter of the wintry wind.

Inside the house a deep calm asserts itself. In the halls huge fires crackle and burn fiercely; but the sound of the pine logs as they flare and sparkle is almost the only thing that disturbs the strange quiet of room and corridor.

Up-stairs, too, all is still. The very servants go softly and on tiptoe, and—— Hush! If you will enter this particular room, why, take care, then, you do it with finger on lip and slowest, quietest footsteps.

The blinds are all lowered. The storm seems miles away. A small but brilliant fire burns calmly,—politely,—as though it fully understands the importance of the occasion, and how necessary is perfect tranquillity, and how unpardonable a crime would be even a falling cinder.

On the hearth-rug stands a tall, plump, motherly-looking woman of about forty, who sweeps the room at intervals with her ox-like eyes, and, letting them fall upon the bed in the distance, allows them to linger on it contentedly, as though she considers herself “monarch of all she surveys” there.

There is a serenity about this woman not to be surpassed,—an extreme repose it must have taken years to perfect. She appears quite mistress of the situation; and as even gentle Gretchen enters, with soft movement and suspended breath, she lays her finger on her lip, and shakes her head mysteriously, as though to enforce still further caution.

Gretchen nods sweetly to her, and, passing on to the side of the bed, bends over it and looks down upon Kitty. Such a fair fragile Kitty! but a Kitty lovelier than she has ever been before. Upon her arm rests a little pink flannel bundle, from which it seems a difficult matter for her to remove her eyes. Gretchen, stooping over the pink bundle, opens it carefully, and gazes lovingly at its contents.

"He is asleep," murmurs Kitty, glancing up for a moment, with a divine smile.

"He always is, isn't he? Darling!" whispers Gretchen, in a tone of passionate admiration, intended for the pink bundle.

Kitty, raising one of her hands, touches the cheek of the sleeping infant, as though to assure herself again for the hundredth time that he is really flesh and blood and her very own.

"Isn't he pretty?" she says, flushing softly.

"Pretty! He is the most beautiful creature I ever saw in my life. Pretty! What a word!" says Gretchen, in a tone that borders on offence.

At this the first "lady of the bedchamber" sees cause to interfere. She sails across the room and looks down with scrutiny upon the unconscious infant.

"Yes, he is a beauty, bless him," she says, warmly. "But he'll catch cold if you uncover his nose."

With this she wraps the baby up again so closely that Kitty suffers mental agonies in the fear that he will die of suffocation, and surreptitiously puts a small white finger on his mouth every now and then, to try if he still breathes.

"He mustn't be interfered with, you know: he won't like it," says nurse, in an obscure tone, nodding her head in a dark fashion, as though she could say more "an she would."

"Oh, no, of course not," says Gretchen, hastily, who is plainly very much afraid of her.

"There's never any knowing what turn a baby may take," goes on nurse, who clearly wishes it to be understood that, though mother and aunt may possibly feel some faint interest in the little one, she, and she alone, is his sole proprietor.

"And I wouldn't talk, you know," she goes on, still uncomfortably full of mystery. "It's fever,—that's what it means. And what will your ma and the doctor say?" addressing Lady Blunden. "There's nothing so bad as talking. It sets one's brain afire. I never talk,—never! It's poison. Why, I knew two as lovely young women as ever I met in my life, and they had friends—as they called themselves—who would talk to 'em; and what came of it? Why, they went out like the snuff of a candle. 'Save me from my friends,' says I, as King David said long before me."

"Who went out, Nurse?—was it the friends?" asks Kitty.

"No, my dear. The young women: they drooped and died, as the song says."

"I should like to talk for a little while," says poor Kitty, who is deadly tired of the enforced silence, and is longing to hear all Gretchen's flattering comments on her first-born.

"I dare say, my dear. I never yet saw a young lady who didn't. But I've told you the consequences."

"But I'm positive Mrs. Dugdale won't snuff me out," persists Kitty, with a faint but amused laugh. Gretchen, however, is too terrified at the awful weight of evidence brought to bear on the case to back her up in her rebellion, and only gazes at her beseechingly.

"You think so, of course," says the worthy woman, with a pitying sigh. "They all thinks that. But I've seed what I've seed. And you must keep quiet. Raging fevers I've seed, and deaths, and destructions, and motherless babies,—and——"

"Oh, Nurse, I sha'n't say one word to her. You may trust me," interrupts Gretchen, aghast. And, true to her word, she declines all Kitty's attempts at conversation, and, sinking into a chair, contents herself with holding the invalid's hand and taking an occasional peep at the little gentleman lying so sweetly in the arms of Morpheus.

* * * * *

The birth of this little son—this most wonderful child in all the world, as his mother firmly believes him to be—has touched a chord in Kitty's breast hitherto unsounded. His advent has changed and softened her whole nature to an unusual degree. The clutch of baby fingers, the moist pressure of two small lips, the nestling of a helpless head, the crushing of a tender face against one's bosom,—what woman who has ever felt all this but has known what it is to be ennobled and rendered kindlier and purer in heart and soul?

Kitty's very face has altered in expression, and has gained additional beauty. From her lips the coldness and bitterness so long habitual to them have vanished, leaving only love and—naturally, considering the trial she has undergone—some deep regret; while her eyes, though full of uncontrollable melancholy, have lost the fire that at times burned too fiercely

in them. Grief has taken the place of anger, and, although unacknowledged even to herself, each day inclines her heart towards forgiveness.

There are moments when, with the child upon her knee, she is almost happy, lost in her love for her present treasure; but these glad moments are paid for heavily by the long hours of terrible depression that inevitably follow on them, and that arise from what she dares not confess even to her own heart, but what is in reality a suppressed longing to show the little one to his father.

She has forbidden Gretchen to put the boy's birth in any of the papers, or to let Sir John know in any way, directly or indirectly, of his existence, to Gretchen's deep but un-availing regret. Perhaps, indeed, the latter might have transgressed the rules laid down by Kitty, had Sir John been within reach of news; but up to this no one has heard any tidings of him or been made aware of his whereabouts.

After that first day when Kitty with vehement tears had demanded a promise from Gretchen that the child's birth should not be advertised, and Gretchen, because of her fear lest agitation in her then weak state should be prejudicial to her sister's health, had given reluctantly the desired promise, Kitty had made no mention of Sir John. But to-day, lying on a couch in the library, with King Baby sleeping in a bewilderingly beautiful bassinet close to her, she breaks the reserve that for so many weeks she has religiously kept.

Gretchen, sitting in a low chair near the fire, with a letter from Kenneth in her hand, is reading aloud little portions of it.

"It seems so strange," she says, presently, laying down the letter, "to think that in two weeks I shall again see him. To think that all the time that seemed so interminable has nearly come to an end; that soon—soon—he will be in this room with me again; that I shall hear him, speak to him, touch him!"

"How happy the thought makes you!" says Kitty, in a curious tone.

"Too happy,"—dreamily: "I am afraid to think of it. There are yet two whole weeks, and—so many things can happen in fourteen days."

"He is better, dearest. He says so."

"Yes, he says so. I dare say better; but I fear he thought he should get well, and there is no mention here"—touching the letter—"of being able to walk or even to stand, or anything to make me think he is in any wise different from what he was when leaving. His recovery has proved a failure."

"I never quite believed in that myself. Never mind, darling,"—mournfully,—“you have his love, and that is surely worth more than all the world beside. To be able to trust fully in what one loves——” She pauses abruptly, and raising her hand, with a sigh, to her brow, gazes into the fire.

"Oh, that you could try to trust again!" whispers Gretchen, bending forward and flushing warmly. Kitty's face darkens. She lets her hand fall again into her lap and shakes her head.

"I only loved one man in all my life, and he betrayed me," she says, in a low voice, but one full of passion.

"Dear Kitty, betrayed you!—surely that is too hard a word. I sometimes tell myself there must be misconceptions that may yet be cleared up."

"Outsiders always think that. And a woman can never quite see that a man is to blame. But if you had suffered as I have suffered it would be different,—as I still suffer,"—in a tremulous tone,—“because in spite of everything I love him yet. That is my heaviest misfortune. At times I have felt half mad. Do you remember how, long ago, when we read that quotation,—

‘Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,’—

we used to laugh at it, and say it was a strained sentiment, and that no woman could feel so badly? I don't laugh at it now. There were moments when, sitting and watching that woman looking into his eyes, and trying her utmost to steal him from me, and succeeding, I have felt as though I could gladly have thrust a knife into her heart."

She has grown deadly pale, and is drawing her breath hard.

"Dearest," entreats Gretchen, kneeling down beside her, with tears in her eyes, and slipping an arm round her neck, "do not talk so. It is terrible. My poor darling, try not to think of it."

"I never cease thinking of it. How would you feel if Kenneth were to treat you so?"

"Oh, Kitty!" says Gretchen, with quick reproach and a pained expression, recoiling a little. "You forget! Poor Kenneth!"

"Ah, true. You are happy that it is so. He is all your own. You are content, while I—I am utterly stranded. I have lost everything."

Very softly Gretchen raises the sleeping infant from his cradle and places him upon Kitty's knees.

"With that child in your arms," she says, gently, bending an adoring face above it, "how can you speak so? You make me think you do not deserve so great a treasure."

"I had forgotten him. My baby, my beloved," says Kitty; and then she cries silently but bitterly, the tears running down her cheeks unchecked. One falls lightly upon the slumbering child.

"You must not cry, Kitty; I forbid it," says Gretchen, austerely. "If you do, you will make baby ill, and yourself ill, and then I shall inevitably fall sick also with fretting about you two. See, you have let a tear disfigure his forehead; and tears must be unlucky on so young a creature. A cruel baptism."

She carefully wipes away the sign of grief, while baby growls, and frowns, and shakes his head, and clenches his small fists, and shows in every way the thorough annoyance he feels at the liberty taken with his majesty's pink face.

"See how he sleeps,—so peacefully, sweet darling," goes on Gretchen, giving Kitty time to recover. "I believe honestly I think more of him than you do."

Kitty smiles.

"You have had him for a long time now, Kitty, haven't you? Give him to me for a little bit. Don't be afraid; I sha'n't wake him, and I promise faithfully not to drop him."

Taking him in her arms very gently, and with a certain motherly touch that comes naturally to her and sits very sweetly on her, Gretchen walks up and down the room with the little one, crooning a tender old-fashioned cradle-song as she goes.

"What lovely little hands he has!" she says, presently, in a caressing whisper. "I think I never saw such tiny hands on any baby before."

"Are they small?" asks Kitty, rising to examine into this

important subject. "Yes; yet I think Mrs. Brooke's baby had hands quite as small."

"Not nearly," says Gretchen, emphatically. "How can you say so? You don't half appreciate him. He should be *my* child, a sweet,—a darling. Yet I think he will be dark, like his mammy."

"I hope he will not resemble me in any way," says Kitty, quickly, "neither in face, nor form, nor disposition. I hope he will be like you, Gretchen, because then he may be happy."

"That is so likely!" says Gretchen, laughing.

"Why not? Many a child is more like its aunt than its mother. Why not mine?"

"I am too fair for a boy. You would surely prefer him darker?"

"I was not thinking of hair, or eyes, or skin when I spoke. I was only wishing he might have a soul as fair as yours."

"Perhaps he will be like his father," says Gretchen, slowly.

But Kitty makes no reply.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"The passions and the cares that wither life
And waste its little hour."—BRYANT.

IN Paris the weather is seasonable and almost mild. No rough winds have blown in its October. People still go about with cheerful faces, and benign smiles, and noses devoid of blue.

Fancy and Cyclamen, who are staying for a week in this most charming of all cities, on their way home, grow almost pathetic over the beauty of the climate, and argue whether it will not be wisdom to stay here fourteen instead of seven days. They have nearly said yes to this plan, when, running down the steps of the hotel leading to the court-yard beneath, they both stop suddenly as with one consent to gaze earnestly

at a man standing at some distance from them. He is quite motionless. His eyes are bent upon the ground, showing their owner lost in thought; and he is industriously doing his best to pull his brown moustache to pieces.

"Is that Sir John, or is it his wraith?" asks Fancy, breathlessly.

"Sir John, I hope. I prefer my friends in the flesh. But how altered he is!—how thin! I should scarcely know him. Wait for me a moment, Fancy: I must speak to him."

"So must I," says Fancy. "I'll go with you."

"No, let me go alone."

"If you wish it, *cara*,"—raising her pretty brows. "But ask him to come up and see us. And"—pleasantly—"ask him, too, where Lady Blunden is,—where they are stopping. Perhaps here."

"Dear Fancy, one word. If I do ask him to come up to our sitting-room, say you will not mention Lady Blunden's name."

"But, my good child, why?"—with the utmost surprise.

"Because"—in an embarrassed tone—"well, I suppose I may as well tell you all. The fact is, the Blundens are not on very friendly terms, and, without making matters public, have agreed to—separate."

"Cyclamen, what is it you would say?" asks Fancy, stepping back, and looking honestly horrified.

"It is only too true,"—regretfully: "I wish it wasn't. It all arose from that masked ball at Twickenham. Sir John was there, it appears, under the rose, with some one who wasn't his wife, and Kitty saw them in the gardens, and—I really know almost nothing; but there was a terrible scene in my house next day, and they parted, and have never been face to face since."

"But he wasn't at Twickenham that night."

"But he was. Kitty saw him. I am afraid he was wrong in some way, but how I don't know. Now, let me speak to him before he goes. And, remember, say nothing of her."

"Of course not. How do you think I should, after all you have told me? I was never so shocked, so bewildered, in all my life."

Turning, she goes up the steps again (while Cyclamen goes down), and, having reached their drawing-room, is still

so puzzled that even when Sir John and Cyclamen enter presently she is *distract* to a degree, and greets him in a manner the reverse of effusive.

Having given him her hand, she moves away, with a faint smile, to a distant chair, leaving Cyclamen and him to retire into a window, where they converse in low tones.

"I am so glad to meet you again," Cyclamen says, kindly, "but so grieved to see you looking so badly. What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Overdoing the thing, perhaps. Incessant travelling without any rest knocks a fellow all to bits, you know. But I'm perfectly well."

"You are not happy," says Cyclamen, quietly. "That is what is the matter with you."

"Is it?"—with a light laugh. "Is any one happy, do you think, in this troublesome world? Would you have me luckier than my fellows? Well,"—changing his mocking tone to one of deep depression,—“perhaps I am not, then. Do you know”—wistfully—“it is rather a blessing to meet some one who—who knows all about my luckless affairs, as I am heartily sick of lying to my friends all round.”

He thrums upon the window-pane for a moment or two, and then says, without looking at his companion,—

"Where is she?"

"Still at Laxton with Mrs. Dugdale. At least she was three weeks ago. I have not heard from her since then, but in her last letter she said she meant to stay there for some time longer."

"Ah! it is pleasanter for her, no doubt."

"I do not imagine she finds any place very pleasant," says Cyclamen, meaningly. Then with an effort, "Why did you not tell her you were going to Twickenham that night?"

"How could I? I never went there."

"But she saw you."

Sir John shrugs his shoulders. "She has excellent eyes, no doubt. And to see is to believe, they say. Nevertheless, I can only repeat I was not there."

"It is extraordinary. Why did you not protest as much to her?"

"She would not listen. And, besides, that was a slight offence, I suppose, compared to others she accused me of."

Why discuss it?"—impatiently. "Nothing matters very much, does it?"

"Why, she described the very domino you wore," persists Cyclamen, who is lost in a vain effort to unravel this seeming mystery.

Their voices within the last two minutes have been slightly raised; so much so that Fancy has been compelled to hear. At this moment she comes forward right up to them, with a heightened color and distressed eyes.

"Did Arthur borrow your domino that night?" she asks, anxiously.

"Yes,"—carelessly. "At the last moment I made up my mind not to go to the ball, and he, coming in just then, asked for the domino, and obtained it."

"It is all quite plain," says Fancy, nervously. "It is altogether a mistake. Did Lady Blunden know you lent your domino to—to—to your cousin?"

"No. There was really no time, no opportunity for explanation upon any subject. She went to the ball. I went to my club."

"Don't you see how it was?" says Fancy, putting one hand up to her cheek, which burns hotly. "Or must I tell you? I was in the garden with—Arthur that evening, and you know how like you he is at times, and how a mask deceives one. And—yes,"—bravely,—“I will confess it now, whatever comes of it: Arthur kissed me that night, and perhaps Lady Blunden saw him, and thought he was you, and that I—oh, I can't say any more—it is too horrible," exclaims she, turning away to hide her face, which is now red as any rose.

"Why did you not tell me all this before?" says Cyclamen, reproachfully, forgetful of her own reticence.

"Why was I told nothing?" retorts Fancy, still more reproachfully.

"That is certainly how the mistake must have arisen. How clear things seem now!" says Cyclamen, cheerfully. "You will see after a little while everything will come right."

Blunden shakes his head.

"That one absurd suspicion was not all," he says. "There are other things. You are very good, awfully kind, you know, to care for my welfare as you do, but—matters have

gone too far. She herself would be the last to welcome a reconciliation."

"Something must be done, and at once," Fancy says, coming forward again excitedly. "I can't have Lady Blunden thinking such dreadful things; I can't indeed. It is as bad for me as for anybody. And, besides, mistakes of that kind should be cleared up. I shall make this cause my own. I shall go to her and tell her everything. And so shall Arthur. And afterwards I shall write to you, Sir John, to your hotel here, and then all will be well again."

The two pretty women are standing, each on one side of him, gazing at him earnestly. Blunden smiles, although his eyes are full of tears.

"I should be happy with two such charming friends," he says.

"And you shall be. You want to be friends again with Lady Blunden? Say you do," says Fancy, taking one of his hands.

He is silent.

"Yes, of course you do. Don't you, now?" says Cyclamen, coaxingly, possessing herself of his other hand.

It is quite a pretty *tableau*; yet Sir John makes no reply.

"Why don't you speak?" demands Fancy, giving him a little shake. "Don't you want to be friends with her?"

"I hardly know what I want," returns he, unsteadily. "I'm only certain of one thing, that what you desire is impossible. I told you there were other reasons,—that she herself would raise an insuperable obstacle against our reunion. The fact is, she—she no longer loves me."

With this he fairly tears himself away from them and hurriedly quits the room.

"He is quite miserable, dear, dear fellow," says Cyclamen, tearfully. "Any one can see it. He is fretting himself to death. And I am positive she is doing just the same. I never met so silly and obstinate and uncomfortable a pair in all my life. Fighting with straws and rushing into a separation actually without knowing why they are doing it. I have no patience with them."

"What is to be done?" says Fancy, eagerly, smiting the palm of one hand with the back of the other. "I cannot sleep until we decide on some course of action. Inactivity

kills me. Cyclamen, dearest, do you think we could start for England by the boat to-night?"

"We might,"—slowly. "Yes, Marshall can see to our things; indeed, they are hardly unpacked. And a week one way or the other doesn't count. And the children, at all events, will be overjoyed at our hurried return. I can telegraph to Aunt Mary about them; and you can telegraph to Arthur—and—yes, by all means let us go."

So it is decided, and they telegraph all over the place, and, crossing by the night-boat, find themselves in London in the morning. A few hours later, Fancy, who has not slept at all and scarcely eaten, enters the train for Laxton, and, arriving there, takes a fly and drives to Laxton Hall.

* * * * *

"A lady in the drawing-room to see you, ma'am," says Lynan, the ancient servitor, opening the door of the library and addressing Gretchen, who is sitting there with Lady Blunden and the boy.

"Her name?" asks Gretchen, lazily, who is nice and warm and cosy and feels thoroughly disinclined to action.

"She would give no name, ma'am, but said she would not delay you more than five minutes."

"Dear me! A begging-letter woman or an impostor of some kind," says Gretchen, much disheartened. "What shall I do? They always talk so fluently, and won't go away. And they will say the same thing a dozen times in different language."

"Put money in your purse, dear," suggests Kitty, blandly. "There is nothing like it in such cases. Is she—a lady—or a woman, Lynan?"

"Oh, quite the lady, my lady, every hinch of her," replies Lynan, with conviction.

"That sounds more promising; nevertheless, as a precautionary measure, I shall take your hint and my purse," says Gretchen, rising, with a sigh. "I notice I am always called away to do something or see somebody just when I am most comfortable. And baby in such a good temper too!"

"Keep well away from her, and think of torpedoes, and hand-grenades, and dynamite, and pokers," says Kitty, as a last comforting suggestion; whereupon Gretchen laughs and vanishes.

Entering the drawing-room a few minutes later, she finds herself face to face with Mrs. Charteris, to her extreme amazement and discomfiture. An expression of extreme *hauteur* grows upon her usually gentle face as she stands still in the centre of the room and regards her fixedly, uncertain what to do or say.

"You!" she says, at last, impulsively, being a bad dissembler, growing very pale, as repugnance and anger and some fear fill her breast.

"Yes," says Fanny, growing pale too, and coming quickly forward. "I must speak to you. There is something that must be explained. Ah, I see you too have put faith in this miserable misunderstanding that has arisen out of nothing."

"I really do not see what it is you can explain," says Gretchen, coldly.

"If you will listen to me you shall hear. Only yesterday I heard of—of——" She hesitates, hardly knowing in what language to couch her knowledge of Kitty's quarrel with her husband. "And I have travelled straight from Paris here, as much for my own satisfaction"—somewhat haughtily—"as for the benefit of other people, to tell you Sir John Blunden was not at Twickenham the night of Lady Monckton's ball. I have been given to understand that it was generally believed he was there."

"Not at Twickenham? You must pardon me, Mrs. Charteris, if I say a wife may surely be allowed to recognize her own husband."

"Sometimes; not always. In this instance at least she was at fault. She made a mistake,—a fatal one. It was Arthur Blunden she saw, dressed in Sir John's domino, and I was with him, in the gardens. She must have seen us. Is it not so?"

"She saw you, yes,"—gravely.

"And on account of the great likeness between the cousins (you must have noticed that), and because of the darkness, and the masks, and all, she must have mistaken Arthur for her husband."

"Can this be true?" says Gretchen, clasping her hands; and, forgetful of nice breeding and proper form, in her delight at the prospect of making life once more bright for Kitty, she says, naively,—

"Then he did not kiss you, after all?"

It is a *bêtise*,—a terrible one,—and Fancy winces. She grows crimson and bites her lip. Gretchen, quick to see, is penitent on the spot.

"Oh, pardon me!" she says. "I am rude,—detestable. What can I say to excuse myself?"

She is so thoroughly grieved about her offence, yet withal so unmistakably relieved and gladdened at the news just conveyed, that Fancy (who is the kindest-hearted creature in the world) forgives her and conquers her temper.

"Now, if I were another woman I should probably be angry," she says, with a little laugh. "Will you insinuate, then, that I kissed Arthur? Oh, shame! And yet I confess to you I did kiss him. Was it so very terrible a thing to do, considering"—with another faint little laugh and a still brighter and far sweeter blush—"he is so soon to be my husband?"

"You are going to marry Arthur!" says Gretchen, quickly, her tone growing more pleased every moment. "Surely this marriage will put an end to all things. I am very glad. And as to your kissing him, under the circumstances I see no harm in that,—none at all; and I beg your pardon many times for many things. But Kitty was so sure, so certain; and Arthur said nothing of having borrowed the domino."

"He only borrowed it at the last moment."

"But why did you not tell all this before?" asks Gretchen; and then ensues an explanation that leaves no room for doubt.

"Yet surely, surely there were times when you were more than civil to Sir John," says Gretchen, doubtfully.

"Were there? I don't know; I think not. Did I ever flirt with him? Well, if so I am sorry. I think you are the only woman in the world I would say so much to. If I have done wrong I come to you with *Mea culpa* on my lips. Do not refuse me grace."

"Tell me one thing," says Gretchen, earnestly. "Were you ever engaged to Sir John—in the old days, I mean?"

"Never: he never asked me to marry him. There was never the faintest sentimental feeling between us, though people would think so. To be candid with you, he would not have suited me at all. You will see I am speaking the truth. I was shocked, horrified, when I discovered Lady

Blunden had taken up such an erroneous idea. But all will be right now, I hope and trust."

"So do I," says Gretchen, sighing, "if only for baby's sake."

"A baby! Is there a baby? You told me nothing of it."

"Yes. A very darling baby. Of course I forgot you could not know; yet he is three weeks old."

"Sir John knows nothing of it?"

"Nothing. She will not let me tell him of it; indeed, up to this I have had no chance of telling him, as I have not known where he is."

"Why not put the birth in the papers?"

"I gave her my promise not to do so."

"That is wrong, surely," says Fancy, hastily. "Forgive me, I am not one to preach, I know, but I cannot help thinking a father should be made aware of his child's birth."

"I quite agree with you; yet I am fettered by my promise; and besides, believing all I did believe until your visit here to-day, I hardly cared to let him know of the little one. And now what am I to do, if she still holds me to my word?"

"Do nothing," says Fancy, rising impulsively to her feet, with rose-flushed cheeks and gleaming eyes. "I don't care about violating oaths; I don't indeed. There is no use in appealing to me. My principles are all astray; and if you think I ought to keep the news you have just communicated to me secret I can only tell you I sha'n't do it. Mrs. Dugdale, as I have been the cause, though the innocent one, of all this misery, do let me also be the one to reduce the chaos to order. Do not refuse me this request. Let me try my best to effect a reconciliation. I think I shall succeed. And when Sir John and Lady Blunden are once more happy together, perhaps"—wistfully—"she will then forgive me."

"But what can you do? What is your plan?"—doubtfully.

"Of course you guess; but, first (pardon the question), does Lady Blunden still love her husband?"

"You are indeed a stranger to Kitty if you can ask it. With her to give her heart once is to give it forever. She believes,—

‘Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.’”

“She is right,” says Fancy, softly; and her mind, breaking from the present moment, travels to Arthur, who at this instant is standing in his club-window wondering disconsolately why it is some hours hold one hundred and twenty instead of sixty minutes. “Then I have your consent to make the attempt?” she asks, in a moment or two.

“I hardly know,”—with hesitation. “If you failed, and Kitty discovered it, she would never forgive me.”

“I shall not fail.” There is a pause; then, with lowered eyes and purposely suppressed voice, Fancy goes on in a dolorous tone,—

“If you saw him, I think you would hardly know him, he has grown so thin, so haggard.”

“Thin?—haggard?”

“Yes; to me he seemed almost dying,” says this wily little hypocrite. “And Cyclamen thought the same. I’m sure something dreadful will happen, if things are allowed to go much farther.”

“Oh, no!” says Gretchen, in an agony. “Don’t say that!”

“Shall I tell you an untruth, then?—that he is in robust health, that he never looked better? What good”—artfully—“can a lie do?”

“Oh! poor Jack!—poor fellow!” says Gretchen. She is very pale, and tears are in her eyes. “Mrs. Charteris, you are right: do anything,—I don’t care what; only bring him home to us.”

“I sha’n’t bring him; but baby will,” says Fancy, smiling brightly. Then, while examining her glove with interest, she says, “After all, perhaps I exaggerated a little. You must not be too uneasy about him. No doubt he will live for years to come; but he certainly did look badly.”

Here, rising gracefully, she begins to make her *adieux*.

“But you cannot go yet,” says Gretchen, with concern. “There will be no train for three hours.”

“I know it; but, as I chance to be in the neighborhood, I shall go and see the Brookes. Lena is an old friend of mine. Besides, Phyllis Carrington is there, with her wonderful baby.”

"Then at least let me dismiss that sad-looking fly and order the carriage for you."

"Thanks; that will be really kind. I confess I nearly wept on my way here, so severely were both my bones and my spirits shaken."

So the carriage is ordered; and when the servant has announced it Fancy lays her hand in Gretchen's.

"I wonder," she says, gravely, with the remarkable sweetness of manner that sometimes belongs to her, "if some day I shall be fortunate enough to call you my friend?"

"I should be ungrateful indeed," replies Gretchen, warmly, "not to call myself so now, when I remember the hope you have restored to me. And"—smiling—"to prove the truth of my assertion, tell me, is there nothing your friend can do for you?"

"Yes; you can kiss me," says Fancy.

"With all my heart," returns Gretchen, with the graciousness that crowns her every action.

And then the two lovely mouths meet, and the kindly feeling between them grows into something warmer, that eventually ripens into the desired friendship, that never afterwards cools or slackens.

So they part; and Fancy, reaching home as evening falls, writes a letter, pathetic, sensible, commanding, that stirs the heart of him who receives it to its lowest depths, causing him to stride up and down his room for hours in a passionate endeavor to come to a satisfactory settlement with his love and pride,—wearing out not only the carpet but the patience of his long-enduring man, who finds no rest from his troubles until at last he safely lands his master upon English soil.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"The rustling grass is greener after the tender rain ;
The hopeful heart is nobler for suffering and pain."

WITH her little child upon her arm, she sits, half dreaming, within the fire's deep glow. Her large dark eyes, liquid and melancholy, build mournful castles in the burning coals that crumble ere yet completed. Now and then a heavy sigh escapes her, while the little one slumbers peacefully, and the moments glide on into eternity.

So absorbed is she in recollections of her sad past, that when the door opens she hears it not nor stirs, until the child, moving uneasily and flinging its hands abroad, rouses her to animation. Softly hushing it with tender kisses and sweet words of endearment that come so readily to the youngest mother, she lifts him and lays him—although reluctantly, feeling her arms empty without him—in his little satin nest beside her.

Then, having assured herself he is again sleeping, without turning her head, she stands upon the hearth-rug and continues her almost unconscious examination of the fire.

I have said that the door was opened a moment since. Now a young man advances cautiously yet eagerly to where she stands. But Kitty, lost in regretful reflections, sees and hears nothing. Of late she has been singularly *distract* and silent, to Gretchen's deep concern. And just now, as though overcome by one intolerable thought, she says aloud, smiting her hands together,—

"Oh, that I could undo my past!"

The effect of this speech is magical. Sir John, who has been drawing nearer with a step half fearful yet full of hope and buoyancy, stops short, all the glad expectancy and quick joy dying from his face. His whole expression changes. He still comes up to her, but slowly and with evident reluctance. All the lightness has gone from his footsteps; he moves heavily,—so heavily that Kitty, turning, with a start, finds herself once again in the presence of her husband.

"You have come!" she says, faintly, turning very white, and grasping the back of a chair to steady herself.

"Yes."

They gaze at each other silently, steadily, marking with eager anxiety the changes wrought during these past miserable months. Blunden's eyes are full of keenest disappointment. To Kitty he appears worn, tired, unlike the careless Jack of bygone days, that now, in spite of all the bitterness lurking in the remembrance of them, seem so possessed of happiness. He has been suffering, enduring anguish, perhaps for love of her. This thought is passionately sweet. An intense desire to run to him, to take him in her arms, to assure him of her undying affection for him,—and him alone,—no matter what truth may lie in the evil thing that has separated them, fills her breast. Yet some strange awkward fear restrains her and holds her rooted to the spot.

Ever since that first hour when she had voluntarily sent him from her, in her secret heart she has been pining for this moment, yet now that he is at last before her she can find no words to welcome him.

The silence is becoming unbearable. Sir John, removing his eyes from hers, looks moodily upon the ground. She, being the woman, is naturally the one to break the uncomfortable stillness.

"What has brought you?" she asks, in a tone the colder in that she is struggling with a quick longing to break into tender words.

"A craving to see you again, I suppose," replies he, bitterly. "Madness, was it not? Yet I confess I was guilty of it. I had made up my mind to return even before I heard of—the child."

"You know of it, then?" murmurs she, with an almost imperceptible glance at the bassinet behind her.

"Yes. Was it right I should hear of his birth only through the courtesy and good feeling of a stranger?"

Kitty is silent. His tone is stern and full of reproach. Yes, she has wronged him in this matter. She acknowledges it now. Her head is lowered, her fingers tightly clasped. Could he but know it, her eyes are wet with tears.

"When I did hear it," goes on Blunden, waxing eloquent over his wrongs, "I could hardly believe you had purposely

kept me in ignorance of it. It was a crueller act than I could attribute to you; yet, in spite of all, I came home,—perhaps even more to see the mother than the child. I might, apparently, have saved myself the trouble. There is evidently no welcome for me here. I should have done more wisely had I remained abroad. My return has only caused you pain and discomfort.”

“Oh, no, no.”

“You say no now, and yet even as I entered the room what words escaped your lips? ‘Oh that I could undo my past!’ I, who had believed you forgiving, almost as anxious for a reconciliation as I was myself, was greeted with the assurance that you regretted the day we ever met.”

“How could you think I meant that?” asks Kitty, faintly, raising her great dark eyes to his,—eyes now drowned in tears.

“Kitty,—Kitty, what am I to understand?” demands he, desperately, in deep agitation, drawing nearer to her.

“Anything you like,” cries she, suddenly flinging herself into his arms. “Only this first, that I love you, and that I have not known a happy moment since we parted.”

* * * * *

“You haven’t seen baby yet,” she says, presently, turning proudly to where the hero of the hour lies sweetly “dreaming the happy hours away.”

“No. How could I see anything but you?”

This graceful compliment is received as it should be.

“Well, you shall see him now,” says Kitty. “He is asleep, but I shall wake him up—for you.”

“No, don’t,” says Jack, in—it must be said to his praise—a very fatherly manner. Perhaps a little—a very little—fear of unpleasant consequences runs through the paternal concern. “Don’t disturb him. Let me see him as he is.”

“But you couldn’t know how heavy he is unless you felt him,” says baby’s mamma, and, stooping, she lifts the little white-robed bundle tenderly,—so tenderly that, beyond a sigh and a wild clutching at the empty air, the lazy, sleepy rogue makes no attempt at waking.

“Now, isn’t he a darling?” she asks, with fondest pride.

“He certainly is,” says Blunden, after a lengthened survey, stooping to press his lips to the pretty Cupid’s forehead. “He is quite white, too, isn’t he?”—in a tone of marked

surprise. "I never saw a baby before, but I was positively told by some one—I quite forget whom—that all babies were red."

"Nonsense!" says Kitty, scornfully. "You must be very ignorant to think that."

"Well, you needn't give yourself airs," says Jack. "Six weeks ago I dare say you knew as little about them as I did."

"No matter. I know all about this baby, at all events," says Kitty, rapturously. "And I tell you he is the dearest, sweetest, loveliest thing in all the world. I am utterly convinced his equal does not exist on earth."

"So am I," returns Blunden, solemnly. And then they look at each other over baby's head, and, as their eyes meet, laugh softly, through very gladness, and thankfulness, and heart's content.

Whether the object of their adoration has heard his praises sounded, and is flattered by them, who shall say? But at all events he chooses this moment of all others to stir and smile blandly, in a most enchanting fashion.

"Ah, see how beautiful he is now," whispers Kitty, eagerly. "Like a dream,—a vision. Nurse says when he smiles so in his sleep he is talking to the angels. And Gretchen tells me she often heard it was the truth."

"No doubt Nurse is a judge," replies Blunden, amiably.

But here the perverse baby, being either deserted by his "high-born kinsmen" (as poor Edgar Poe has it), or possessed by some demoniac influence, entirely changes his tactics and loses sight of his angelic properties. His whole face grows convulsed; the blood rushes to it; his forehead grows into a thousand wrinkles; his lips curve; the feature they are pleased to call his nose becomes hopelessly indistinct.

"My dear Kitty," says Blunden, horrified at this awful transformation, "what on earth is the matter with him? He—he isn't going to be ill, is he?"

"No; oh, no; he often does that,—dreadfully often. But I wish he wouldn't," says Kitty, nervously. "Nurse says it means nothing,—that all babies do it; but I really wish he wouldn't. Ah! there he is himself again. See how serene he looks now, my sweet little heart."

She regards the baby silently, with renewed admiration. Blunden draws a deep sigh of relief.

"I hope he won't do it again," he says, "at least for a while. I never saw anything so appalling in my life."

After a moment or two Kitty says, with a flattering smile,—

"Don't you see a likeness?"

"No, I can't say I do," confesses he, reluctantly. At this instant he would have given anything to be able to say he did, if only to oblige her.

"Don't you?"—surprised. "Look again."

He looks again, with the same result, and for the second time admits his inability to trace a likeness to anything human in the tiny face beneath him.

"That is curious; and I really think you a little stupid. Why, my dearest Jack, he is the very image of you!"

She looks at him triumphantly, as one might who had paid him—and was glad to pay it—the highest compliment that heart could conceive.

"Oh, is he?" says Blunden, weakly, trying hard to appear overjoyed. "Well, I'm sure you know that is very gratifying, and satisfactory, and that. But, my darling girl, is my nose like that?"

"The very identical same. Don't you see it?"—anxiously.

"I don't," says Blunden, ruefully.

"Well, perhaps not exactly just yet; but it will be quite yours when it develops."

"Oh, when it develops!"

"And his hair is the very color of yours."

"I congratulate him," says Sir John. "But where is it?" This is brutal, and Kitty is justly affronted.

"He has quite a quantity of it, at the back of his head," she says; "only this little white shawl hides it. I do think, Jack, you are very nasty to the darling child; and, whether you like it or not, he *shall* be the image of you,—there!"

"I'm sure I don't see how he could do better," says Jack, agreeably. Whereupon Kitty laughs and throws to him a little glance that tells him she entirely coincides with his opinion.

"Never mind," she says to her son, "his mother shall spoil him doubly,—a darling,—to make up for an unappreciative papa."

"I wish he would open his eyes," says Sir John. "Is he always asleep?"

"Pretty nearly. In that way he is most provoking. He always gets drowsy directly I want to show him to any one."

"Give him a little shake," says Sir John.

"Do you think I might?"—hesitatingly. "Well, then——"

Fortunately for the poor infant, Gretchen at this instant enters the room. There is a slight appearance of anxiety about her, which vanishes, as she sees the attitude of Sir John and Kitty, leaving only an expression of happiest relief and gladness in her dove-like eyes.

"Don't overlook my nephew," she says, gayly. "Remember, you have not sole claim to him; he is quite as much my son as yours. Kitty!"—indignantly,—“is it possible you are trying to wake him? I never heard of anything so iniquitous. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. And you to call yourself a mother! Come to your auntie, my bonny boy, and she will not disturb your blessed slumber."

"You will notice with what success Gretchen has been studying and borrowing from Nurse's vocabulary. She is now ready for examination in all the choice terms of endearment meant for a babe of six weeks old. I'm quite nowhere in comparison with her," says Kitty, with a laugh so gay, so merry, so like the ringing laugh of the old days that Gretchen's eyes fill with tears.

Kitty, seeing, and understanding her emotion, turns and lays her hand upon her shoulder.

"You knew of Jack's coming," she says, with a would-be reproachful smile, "and never told me! Traitor!"

"I knew nothing of it until this morning,"—quickly and thoughtlessly.

"No?"—in amazement. "What, then, were you not the one to write and tell him about baby?"

Gretchen shakes her head.

"How often did you make me promise not to do that?" she says.

"Who, then, did it?" demands Kitty, glancing inquiringly at her husband, who, coming up to her, encircles her with his arms.

"Let me tell you," he says.

"No, let me," interrupts Gretchen, hastily, feeling strangely nervous. What if Kitty should receive the intelligence in

bad part?"—"I am sure I know. I have reason. It was—Fancy Charteris!"

Kitty turns very pale and looks down.

"How did she learn my secret?" she asks, constrainedly; and then Gretchen tells the story of her visit to Laxton, and Kitty learns for the first time—because Gretchen, not expecting Sir John's return so soon, had shrunk from telling her before, not knowing how the explanation would be taken—of the unfortunate mistake about the domino.

When the recital is at an end, Kitty, after a severe struggle with dislike and prejudice, says, quietly,—

"It was kind of her."

"I knew you would agree with me on that point, dearest," says Gretchen; and then she remembers opportunely that baby must want Nurse, and leaves the room in search of her.

"Then you took me to your heart again—you forgave me—while still believing me so guilty towards you?" says Sir John, regarding his wife earnestly.

"Yes. Am I not mean-spirited?" whispers she, with quivering lips.

"You are an angel," replies he, fervently. "My darling, I am glad you have told me this. Now indeed I am forever convinced you love me."

"Did you ever doubt it?"—reproachfully.

"Well, there were moments when I did," confesses he, slowly; "but they are at an end,—never to return."

And then they look into each other's eyes a little sadly, as memory, filled with painful doubts and fierce heart-burnings, rises up and overpowers them.

Gretchen's somewhat abrupt entrance turns the current of their thoughts.

"I have just received a telegram," cries she, with flushed cheeks and trembling hands. "It is from Kenneth. He will really be home on Thursday, as he told me in his last letter. I hardly dared believe it until now. Do not our blessings 'crowd,' as the Americans say?" She is laughing tremulously, with a soft gleam in her eyes and a faint catching in her breath.

"Then we shall all be together again soon!" says Kitty, joyfully. "How good that sounds! Dear old Ken! I wonder"—dreamingly—"what he will think of baby?"

At this both Sir John and Gretchen laugh unrestrainedly, and are still laughing when the door is thrown open to admit Miss Flora Tremaine, who enters with the skirt of her habit flung over her arm, having ridden over from the Towers to see her sisters and give her free and unbiassed opinion on things in general and the boy in particular.

Seeing Sir John, she stops short and arches her perfect brows to express unmitigated astonishment. Not having been allowed to master the exact facts of the case, she is rather in the dark as to the cause of the late estrangement between her sister and her brother-in-law.

"Oh! so you have come back!" she says, severely, advancing to give him her cheek as a salute in a calm but reproving fashion. "Well, I must say you didn't hurry yourself. But I suppose babies, however lovely, are not exactly novelties nowadays."

"Don't scold me, Flora," entreats Jack, meekly.

"Oh, dear, no. I shouldn't dream of it," retorts Miss Flora. "I conclude Kitty, if she has any spirit left, has done all that. Though, to judge by appearances,"—with a scrutinizing glance at the radiant Kitty,—“she seems to have given in disgracefully soon. Some people are so lost to all sense of dignity. When I am married I sha'n't allow my husband to go travelling all over the face of the earth without me. However,”—with a shrug of disgust,—“I shall say no more. Of course it isn't my business.”

"Oh! I thought perhaps you had made it yours," suggests Sir John, mildly.

"No, thank you. I have more of my own than I can manage. But where have you been?"

"All over the shop," says Jack, absently.

"That's slang," says Miss Tremaine. "Please don't talk slang. It grates. It is such fearful form. But when men go abroad, I notice, they never come back quite the same. Have you been to the Cape?"

"No."

"Oh, then you have been nowhere," says Flora. "You might as well have stayed at home and looked after Kitty, for all the good you've done."

"Much better," says Jack, giving Kitty's hand a surreptitious squeeze.

"I'm sure I don't know what's going to become of me," says Flora, turning to Gretchen. "That tiresome boy Dandy has written to say he will be with us on Saturday. I haven't quite made up my mind yet what I shall do about it. Mamma is so weak."

"Why, Brandy is coming here on that day. How much pleasanter it would be for them if they were both together!"

"But, my dear child, they are at daggers drawn. They won't speak to each other. They positively can't breathe in the same atmosphere, and would for no earthly consideration let the same roof cover them."

"But why? How is it they have not agreed of late? They used to be like Damon and Pythias, or some of those people."

"Don't you know? I found it all out from Dandy last month. They have quarrelled, and all about a woman! So silly, isn't it?" says Miss Flora, turning up her delicious little nose in high contempt. "It is really almost too paltry to talk about; but it appears they both fell in love with the same divinity, and came to grief over her."

Gretchen laughs.

"What divinity? Alice Mayne?"

"No. I could understand that. But to be jealous and break up a lifelong friendship about such a tiny, insignificant creature," (Miss Tremaine promises to be tall) "as Mrs. Charteris seems too absurd."

There is an awkward pause. The three other occupants of the room look faintly uncomfortable, and begin to feel small.

"I saw her once, and I can't conceive any one being jealous of her," goes on this awful child. "Can you, Kitty?"

Kitty blushes. So does Sir John.

"I don't know. No, of course not. At least I am not," replies she, incoherently, with a swift shy glance at Sir John.

"I should think not, indeed. How literal you are, Kitty! I think jealousy the most debasing and detestable and demoralizing of all sentiments. Don't you, Jack?"

This is too much for Blunden. Catching Gretchen's eye, he gives way to wild mirth and laughs so heartily that presently she and Kitty, taking the infection, laugh too, and awkwardness dies a timely death.

"Of course one can't account for Brandy," goes on Flora,

utterly unmoved. "He is quite too much for any one. His heart, if he has one, is always all over the place, and——"

"That's slang," interrupts Sir John, austere. "You should recollect yourself. It grates. It is wretched form. Bad style. Low,—worse than low. I wonder at you, Flora. And I believed you such a nice child."

"Child indeed!" says Miss Tremaine, indignantly. "I'm taller than Gretchen; and I'm going to London in two years to be presented. You shouldn't talk about things you don't understand. But to return to what I was saying. Fancy Dandy wanting to marry a woman old enough to be his mother, I shouldn't wonder!"

"I don't believe she is a day older than he is; she is quite young," says Kitty, and then pauses, full of intense surprise at her own support of the woman she has so detested.

"I thought you were going to marry him," ventures Sir John, rashly. Every one is rather afraid of Flora when in one of her awful moods, as she is just now.

"Well, so perhaps I may some day," returns that young lady, with perfect clearness and a charming want of embarrassment; "but not yet, of course. He is quite too young, and absurdly wanting in common sense. If he improves I may think of it. And yet I don't know. I confess he has lowered himself very much in my estimation by this ridiculous infatuation about Mrs. Charteris. I'm sure"—going to a mirror and examining herself therein with leisurely enjoyment of her own charms—"I am far better looking myself."

"After all, I believe you are guilty of this heinous crime of jealousy," says Gretchen, laughing; "or why do you talk so much about her?"

"You can't expect me to demean myself by arguing such a point as that," says Miss Flora, with superb scorn. "Let us change the subject."

"By all means, dear. What a pretty dress you wore yesterday!"

"That's a mere matter of detail," says Miss Tremaine, shrugging her shoulders. "May I return to the present? I want to tell you the intense relief I have felt ever since I have known Brandy is not to come to the Towers for a while. That boy is the bane of my existence. How is baby, Kitty? May I go to the nursery to see him?"

"Yes, dear, certainly. But promise me"—anxiously—"you will not interfere with any of Nurse's arrangements for him. She didn't like it the other day, you know."

"No one likes being discovered in a fault," says Flora, calmly. "And I warn you, Kitty, she is a very ignorant person. Only for me, I am convinced, your poor darling child would now be lying cold in his grave. You know yourself, I presume, that nothing is so good for a crying child as a hot bath?"

"Yes, dear,"—deferentially,—“but not too hot, and not with mustard in it. And—and don't give him another, Flora, when Nurse is out of the way.”

"You are a most ungrateful person," says Miss Tremaine, with a sudden burst of indignation; "and when next I hear your poor child screaming until he is black in the face I—I—I shall let him scream—that's all!"

"Thank you, dear," says Kitty, in a deeply grateful tone, hiding her face, which is convulsed with laughter, behind Sir John's arm; whereupon Miss Tremaine quits the room in high dudgeon.

CHAPTER XL.

"Pack clouds away, and welcome day:
With night we banish sorrow;
Sweet air blow soft, mount larks aloft,
To give my love good-morrow."

T. HEYWOOD.

"My true love hath my heart, and I have his,
By just exchange one to the other given.
I hold his dear, and mine he cannot miss.
There never was a better bargain driven:
My true love hath my heart, and I have his."

SIR P. SIDNEY.

WHETHER October is ashamed of its boisterous entrance, or whether the swift approach of death has softened it (as lies within the power of death to do at times, killing, as it does, all fire and energy), I know not, but to-day is mild and balmy and sweet as one stolen from the middle of September.

The very wind is gentle, except in certain points and at noted corners, where it comes with a swish and a swirl, chilling those it touches; but in the broader parts it is unfelt, and the sun is almost warm, and from the lawns and distant hills a faint moist odor rises, reminding one insensibly of spring.

In the bay down far below the noise of the sea is hushed. No sound of passionate waves, beating their hearts out against unsympathetic rocks, can be heard: all is silent, lulled to rest, as though Nature, overcome by her late rioting, has fallen into a weary sleep.

There was rain last night. The gravel is still wet, and on green grass and shrubberies lie diamond-drops that glint and glisten in the sunshine; while little spiders' webs, bedecked with heaven's tears, spread themselves like veils of silver gossamer from branch to branch.

Gretchen, coming from her garden with some pale chrysanthemums in her hands, pauses idly to look around upon the landscape that would be glorious but for the absence of leaf.

"The sky is blue as the summer sea,
The depths are cloudless overhead;
The air is calm as it can be;
There is no sight or sound of dread."

But for the twittering of a few brown birds, that sit preening their feathers beneath the strong dark leaves of the evergreens, "all the air a solemn stillness holds,"—a stillness that makes itself felt, and is even rendered more expressive because of the music of a leaping cataract that rising in the hill beyond,—a stately hill,—

"With woods o'erhung, and shagg'd with mossy rocks,"—

roars down its side, to fall at last lovingly into the calm bosom of a lake beneath.

A little song is in Gretchen's heart,—one of thanksgiving,—yet she gives no voice to it, loud lilting of any words being impossible to her at this moment. The sunshine gladdens her, seeming as it were a joyful omen of good days yet to come. It harmonizes with her every thought, because to-day—oh, blessed morning!—her Kenneth will return.

She smiles instinctively, almost unconsciously, as, standing

on the terrace and looking towards the slumbering ocean, she again assures herself of this fact. Yet, even as she smiles, through very agitation of delight, the tears gather and dwell within her lovely eyes. All the world outside may breathe, and love, and die: what is it to her at this supreme instant, when she is filled with the glad certainty that in an hour or two her lover, her husband, will be clasped in her fond arms?

I think the selfishness of joy is one of its greatest charms, it is so delicious to be able to forget for even one brief instant every one and everything, and all the worries and turmoils of life, and lose one's self utterly in the crowning gladness that has made us for the time being (alas! how short a time!) as gods on Mount Olympus.

Going in-doors, she makes her way to his room, and looks around it. Yes, all is in order; it is just as he left it: no faintest flaw can be discovered. She almost wishes it was not so perfect, that there might yet remain something wanting to his comfort that she might arrange for him. Going to the sofa, she deliberately and with care shakes up the already well-shaken pillows, patting them tenderly, as though even now she can see the beloved head resting on them. Then she places a few of the soft white chrysanthemums in a quaint Wedgwood bowl he used to admire, and, with a last lingering glance behind her, leaves the room and goes downstairs to the one where first she saw him,—the room he most affects,—perhaps for that very reason.

Here, too, the servants have left her without occupation. All is as it should be. Mechanically she pokes the fire, that burns as fiercely as though some salamander dwelling in it is exciting it to open rebellion. What shall she do to cheat time, to make the moments fly? Did ever morning pass so slowly?

What if he did not come at all to-day,—if the journey had proved too much for him? She grows pale at the bare thought. But no; he would have sent a telegram in that case: he would not leave her in suspense; and, in spite of her aversion, she has faith in the dark young doctor, and he himself had sent one curt line to say Kenneth would reach home to-day.

Indeed, her aversion for Dr. Blunt has rather died a natural death, now that he is giving Dugdale back to her alive,

and, if not better, at least no worse than when they parted. She has Kenneth's own word for that. In his very last letter, though he had not touched on the subject of improvement, he had positively assured her he had not deteriorated in health since last he saw her.

What o'clock is it now? Examining the marble betrayer of time upon the mantel-piece, she tells herself that in fifteen or twenty minutes, according to the speed the horses may make, he can be here.

Shall she go into the hall to meet him? No,—yes; she hardly knows: a curious nervousness is oppressing her. Oh that it was all over, and her Kenneth safe within her sight again! What an eternity fifteen minutes can be! And how slowly this clock ticks! There must be something wrong with——

There is a slight sound, as of an opening door. She turns languidly, and——

Who is the tall young man standing pale and expectant in the doorway, with large blue eyes from which all melancholy has forever flown, with parted lips, and an agitated but happy smile? In each of his hands is a stick, on which he supports himself; but he is standing—standing——

From Gretchen's lips breaks a low but piercing cry. Involuntarily she places her hand against her throat, as though suffocating, and then, rushing forward, she flings her arms around the new-comer with passionate gladness, yet with a suspicion of the old carefulness.

She lays her head upon his breast, and, finding herself once again within the haven of his fond embrace, falls to weeping bitterly, as though her heart is broken.

"You should have told me; you should have told me," she whispers, incoherently, unable to control her emotion.

The shock of surprise has proved almost too great. To see him at all—alive, safe—is happiness enough; to see him as he now is, so far on the road to absolute recovery, adds to her joy, until it amounts to something akin to pain.

I think Kenneth himself is a little frightened at the tempest he has provoked. He has relinquished all support, and, leaning against the wall, is holding her to him in a silent but passionate embrace. Yes, he should have told her: the strain has proved too great. Yet the almost boyish delight that lay

in the thought of appearing before her—of actually walking into her presence (however haltingly) unannounced and unsupported—had prevented his disclosing to her the fact that in the future lies the hope that he may yet be as his fellows, nearly, if not quite, all he once had been.

Presently—it being the most natural thing in the world for her to consider others before herself—Gretchen remembers, with a little pang, how bad all this agitation must be for him, and by a supreme effort conquers her emotion.

Raising her head, she looks at him long and earnestly, then—still holding his hands—leans back and regards with amazement (that has both pride and perplexity in it) his tall, slight figure, that yet stoops a little at the shoulders. Then she draws a long, deep breath; and then they kiss each other again, solemnly, fervently. There is a content too great for smiles. And I think she finds they have both been crying, because there are at least signs of tears upon his dark lashes.

“You have stood too long already,” she says, feverishly, and, stooping, would have restored to him both his crutches, but, with a smile, he declines one, and, accepting her shoulder instead of it as support, walks to the sofa near the fireplace. Making him lie down upon it, as in the olden days, she kneels beside him, and, smoothing back his hair from his forehead, gazes at him again tenderly, as though her eyes could never tire of what they have to feast upon.

After a moment or two she says, softly, in a low, pathetic tone, that comes straight from her glad heart,—

“Thank God!”

And I believe the whole Book of Common Prayer does not contain more soul-felt thanksgiving than is conveyed in these two earnest words as uttered by her.

“Yes, how can we ever be grateful enough?” says Kenneth, slowly. “It is more than I deserve. I took the whole thing so badly, and rebelled so bitterly at times,—indeed, always.”

“I think I never saw any one so marvellously patient,” says Gretchen, promptly, and with the air of one who will not suffer contradiction.

“I think, Gretchen,” he says, earnestly, “I should like to do something for—for the poor, you know, and the wretched, and that. I sent a check to one of the London hospitals;

but I should like to do something nearer home. Didn't the rector want new school-houses built, or a new chancel? or what was it?"

"School-houses. But he was here on Monday, and said he had secured funds sufficient for them. But he said also," brightening, "he was most anxious to get some almshouses built, as there are three or four old men and women in the town, very respectable and very dependent,—I think old Widow Furness is one; and we agreed how charming it would be to have them comfortable in their last days."

"Then we shall build them," says Dugdale, with interest,—"as many as the rector wishes; and you shall see to them."

"May I have them erected in any shape or form I wish?"

"You may have them built in imitation of the Pyramids, if you so fancy it; only I would have you remember old Widow Furness and her rheumatism,—they always have rheumatism, don't they?—and that comfort doesn't always follow on the heels of the picturesque."

"They shall have the very prettiest and cosiest cottages in the parish, with gardens before, and everything of the most desirable. And they shall be as unlike almshouses as possible. I should so like to make them forget the unhappy fact of their being so."

"And you will have to take the occupants snuff, and tobacco, and tea, and brandy, and blankets, every week, you know," says Kenneth. "I have always heard that is part of the performance. How I shall envy you those weekly visits!"

"I shall take you with me," says Mrs. Dugdale, mildly. "I'm not selfish."

"Very well: they shall be begun the moment we return from Italy, in the spring."

"From Italy?"

"Yes; I forgot I had not told you. I am to winter there, and you are to come with me, to take care of me, if you will be so kind,"—smiling, and pinching lovingly her little rounded ear, that looks like nothing so much as a tiny pink sea-shell.

"That will be delicious," says Gretchen, gayly, bringing her hands together with a pretty ecstatic movement. "It has been the dream of my life to go to Rome; and to find

myself really going there now, and with you, it sounds"—with a soft sigh of the most utter content—"too good to be true."

"Little flatterer," says he; but he looks as pleased and delighted as he ought to look. "So the almshouses have arranged themselves," he says, presently. "And, look here, darling, endow them as richly as you like, or as the rector thinks proper, as I know there must be a good deal of ready money lying idle during these past two years."

"These two past miserable years: why don't you say it?" asks she, maliciously. "It was on your lips."

"No, nor yet in my heart. This last year—though I confess there were moments when I would have given anything to be able to get up and go riding or driving with you—was the most perfectly happy I ever knew."

"Then your next shall be happier, if I can make it so. And until you can ride with me, I shall wait for you. How cruel I have often been to you!"

"Horribly so."

"And unkind, too."

"Very."

"And thoughtless."

"Abominably so."

"Kenneth," says Mrs. Dugdale, with sudden and unlooked-for energy, considering the charming humility of the foregoing sentences, "if you say another word I shall infallibly box your ears. I would have you remember, sir, you are not yet out of my power."

"And I would have you remember, madam, that perhaps soon I shall be, and in a position to resent your ill treatment and prove to you I am your master."

"I think you are that now," replies she, rubbing her soft warm cheek against his in a little fond fashion that belongs to her. Then, with a start, "Ken, darling, you must have something: you are tired and hungry." She says this most anxiously, being one of those women who, if she had children, would be sure to imagine them in a state of starvation every hour of the day, and would always have a biscuit in her pocket for the baby's delectation, in case she should meet him at any unexpected corner.

"Nothing yet," says Dugdale, with a slight gesture of re-

fusal. "I must rest and talk to you a little. After a while I should like a glass of sherry and a biscuit,—nothing more, as I had something just before leaving town."

"You are sure?"—anxiously.

"As sure as one can be of anything, nowadays."

"Tell me how you came in so quietly," she asks, with some curiosity.

"I desired them to drive to the side entrance, and fortunately we found the door there open. Higgins and John gave me their arms to the hall, and from thence I walked boldly away from them into your presence. I really think the two men were most unfeignedly glad to see me able to do so."

"I am certain of it," says Gretchen, ready tears springing to her eyes. "I always liked Higgins, even though he is pockmarked; he is a most excellent servant. I—I have quite a regard for Higgins."

Dugdale, at this sudden burst of enthusiasm for the hitherto unthought-of Higgins, forgets his manners and gives way to unmistakable mirth.

"I think his wages ought to be raised," he says: "don't you?"

"I do," replies she, stoutly.

"I'd raise everybody's wages," goes on he, still laughing, "and order 'wickski' all round besides, like Burnand."

"I should like to," returns she, undaunted. "Now! Have you snubbed me enough, you naughty boy? But it does make my heart warm when I hear how they all love you. Ken, how long your moustache has grown! and it is a little fairer, isn't it?"

"Is it? Have I changed, then?"

"Slightly, and for the better. Your face has stolen from the Fatherland a little brown shade that I love."

"I thank my stars I haven't changed for the worse," says he, devoutly. "You might have objected to me on my return and sued for a divorce, and Blunt would have had to answer for it. By the by, he says that only for my own obstinate refusal to take medical advice during all these past months, before I came to town, I might have been as far recovered as I am now a year ago."

"If so, you would probably never have come to Laxton, and never have met me," says she, quickly, keeping love, as

a woman will, always in sight, as the chiefest good the world can afford.

"Then I am glad I was obstinate," rejoins he, with such satisfactory genuineness in look and tone as makes her color deepen to a rich delicious pink, and creates within her a little warm glow that renders her already happy heart even happier.

"Where is Dr. Blunt now?" she asks, quickly, some fresh idea having occurred to her. "How is it I never asked about him before, dear, kind, charming man?"

"Bless me!" says Ken; "the last time we discussed him I fancied you spoke of him as one of the most detestable of men, if not the vilest wretch on the face of the earth."

"Oh, we have changed all that," says Mrs. Dugdale, with an enchanting little grimace. "I now think him the most delightful, fascinating, irresistible young man of my acquaintance; and I shall certainly make a point of telling him so when we meet."

"My dear, I hope you won't. I have a regard for that young man. You will turn his head, and reduce him to idiocy, if you go making pretty speeches to him with that intense look in your eyes. At present he is useful to mankind. Do not spoil him for his profession."

"Nevertheless I really must see him, and tell him something of all I feel. Yes, I shall go to town myself, the whole way, to thank him for what he has done, if, indeed, I can find words to express myself. Do you know, Ken,"—solemnly,—“I almost feel as if I could kiss him?”

"Oh, don't, you know," says Dugdale, mildly. "I really wouldn't, you know, if I were you. He wouldn't like it. It would frighten him to death. And then it would be such a horribly one-sided affair, you see, because I'm positive he wouldn't return it. Think of the disgrace of that!"

"That, on the contrary, would be another inducement to do it. Well, perhaps I may not go so far as to embrace him; but I shall certainly want to do it all the time."

"Poor Blunt!" says Kenneth.

Suddenly, with a little change of manner, and a faint but tremulous passion in her voice, she says,—

"Kenneth, there is one thing you have never told me."

"What is it, my darling?"

"Will you tell me truly?"

"I will indeed."

"Then did you miss me much?"

"Need I answer that question?"—with gentle reproach. "Every hour, every minute in the day I missed you. You will never know how much. When I woke each morning, my first thought was, 'Now I am one day nearer to my Gretchen.'"

"Did you? Really!"—with eager gladness. "Ah, how alike we are! That is just what I thought. Each morning I said, too, 'Now I am twenty-four hours closer to my Ken;' and now——" She pauses. Then, "But how pale you are, darling! You must have a glass of wine this instant."

She rings the bell, and as Lynan comes to answer it, and while the "fa' o' his fairy feet" can still be heard outside the door, Kenneth raises himself to a sitting posture, and says, quickly, with all the eagerness of a boy,—

"Let me rest my hand on your shoulder. I must let him see that I can stand."

"But, dearest, take care you do not fatigue yourself too much," says Gretchen, cautiously, feeling it her duty to expostulate, though in reality she is dying to show him off to every one.

"Not a bit of it," says Ken, briskly. "I am to walk so much every day; and I didn't do my accustomed allowance this morning: so I may take liberties with myself now. Ah, Lynan, I am very glad to see you again."

He is standing tall and erect,—if one hand is on Gretchen's shoulder,—and Lynan, awe-struck, delighted, indeed overcome with emotion, is standing too staring at him. The old man has known him since he was a lad; has given him his first lessons in riding and his first surreptitious shots out of his uncle's gun during the holidays; has gloried in his beauty and strength, and mourned over his misfortune. Now, advancing slowly, he takes the hand his master extends to him between both his own, and, having bowed over it, says,—

"Oh, sir—sir!" in a tone impossible to describe, and, finally breaking into sobs, beats a rapid retreat.

"He shall have his wages raised too," says Gretchen, with an attempt at lightness that rather falls through, because her tone is heavy with tears. In a minute or two, however, correcting herself sternly, she says,—

"Now we shall have no more scenes to-day: on that I am determined. So I shall go for the wine myself. Because I know Mrs. Judson" (the housekeeper) "will want to see you next, and I simply won't have you tormented or fatigued, which means the same thing. Kenneth, lie down again directly. What do you mean by overtaking your strength in this manner?"

"I'll telegraph for Blunt if you address me in that tone again," says Dugdale, with a slight smile. "Very well, then, I will be obedient. You shall make me your prisoner if you like: I desire no better fate and no gentler jailer. But, I say, Gretchen, don't be long."

CHAPTER XLI.

Ros. "By my troth, and in good earnest, and so God mend me, and by all pretty oaths, they are not dangerous, if you break one jot of your promise, or come one minute behind your hour, I will think you the most pathological break-promise, and the most hollow lover, and the most unworthy of her you call Rosalind, that may be chosen out of the gross band of the unfaithful: therefore, beware my censure, and keep your promise."—*As You Like It.*

"By yonder moon, I swear you do me wrong."

Merchant of Venice.

MRS. CHARTERIS, having for once in her life essayed to do a good action and succeeded therein, is naturally oppressed with a sense of her own virtue. At present she is very honestly in love with herself and her politic treatment of what she is pleased to term an "unlikely situation," and plainly regards herself in the light of a wily diplomat.

With Fancy to possess a happy thought means to be conversational. She must impart it. And, as she is staying with Cyclamen for the few days they both intend to remain in town preparatory to their flight into the country, the latter has rather a bad time. Indeed, when she has for the fourteenth time discussed amicably, and with a futile hope that it will be the last, the subject of Lady Blunden's reconciliation with her husband, she loses all patience, and refuses

indignantly to listen to a fifteenth recital of how it was managed.

No, it is too much; she cannot, indeed! There is a limit to all things, especially to human forbearance, and she simply won't hear any more of it. No one can feel more heartfelt joy than she at the cessation of hostilities between dear Kitty and Sir John, but really it is quite within the borders of possibility to hear too much of even a good thing.

And of course that letter was admirable,—undoubtedly quite everything it ought to have been,—and did its work to perfection. No doubt it was the most perfect marvel of wit, and tact, and cleverness combined, that ever yet was penned; but now that she (*Cyclamen*) has cheerfully and gladly acknowledged it to be such, surely there is nothing more to be said about it; and repeating things over and over again is very wearing to the constitution. Doesn't Fancy think so?

Also she can fully understand how proud a person might feel who, having squandered a whole lifetime in an abyss of folly (here Fancy rises threateningly), at last achieves one small atom of good, and that by accident: still, modesty is an admirable quality; and if death has been rude enough to remove one's trumpeter it would perhaps be advisable at all hazards to secure the services of another, and not go about the world blazoning one's own fame, and——

"*Cyclamen*!" says Fancy, laying her hands on her shoulders, "another word, and I shall shake you into little bits!"

At which they both laugh, and Fancy for three hours afterwards smothers her desire for conversation on the all-engrossing topic.

Cyclamen had telegraphed to Arthur to announce their return to town the morning after Fancy's visit to Laxton. Yet two, three days have gone by since that, and neither tale nor tidings of Arthur have been received. Fancy, at first surprised, had then grown indignant, and now has reached the secret though honestly anxious state of mind. It is unconceivable—nay, according to her experience, an unheard-of thing—his silence and neglect. If indeed he has grown tired of her (here she frowns and flings her book impatiently aside), and found another he can love better (here the tears grow within her eyes), at least he might have the scant courtesy to write and say so.

This is the third morning since the telegram was sent, and still no sign. Fancy is sitting in Cyclamen's morning-room, pensively wondering what on earth it can all mean, when the door opens, and, lo! on the threshold appears the recreant knight himself *in propria persona*.

Fancy flushes warmly, and, rising, extends to him long before he reaches her—with a view to keeping him at a proper distance—a most unfriendly hand. Her lips are unloving, her eyes are unkind.

"I am so sorry you made such great haste," she says, in a tone ominously polite.

Now, Arthur has been dreaming of a widely different reception. He has heavily bribed the driver of the fleet hansom that conveyed him from the station to risk life and limb in a desperate effort to outdo the original Jehu and bring him swiftly into the presence of his beloved. Yet now that he is here he is conscious of a sense of disappointment almost overpowering. When a man has been for hours looking forward to a warm caress, a glad smile, a welcoming glance, and is met instead with a cold stare and the freezing pressure of lovely but unwilling fingers, I fancy it rather takes it out of him.

Mr. Blunden at all events is awe-stricken, and is standing literally at arm's length (her eyes forbid his advancing even one step nearer), looking crushed and miserable, and filled with a vague wonder as to what may be going to happen next.

"I hope you have had some good hunting," says Mrs. Charteris, still awfully polite. "It was cruel to drag you up to town in the middle of it."

"I wasn't dragged," says Arthur, uncertain of her meaning: "I came of my own free will, because I was dying to come."

"Did the southerly wind forsake you?" demands she, with malicious innocence.

"I never thought about the wind. I haven't been hunting for the last two days," returns he, warmly.

"What! did all your hunters come to grief?"—with a languid, provoking uplifting of her heavily fringed lids.

"Did you receive my telegram?" asks he, quickly, some inspiration seizing him.

"I received neither letter, nor telegram, nor message of any description,"—coldly. "You had mine, of course?"

"A telegram from Lady Cyclamen,—yes, telling me of your arrival in town; and I answered it to you,—to your house, thinking you were there. Did none of your servants send it to you?"

"I don't believe they know of my being in town,"—in a tone the faintest degree more cordial,—the very faintest. "I have not been to South Audley Street since my return."

"Then you don't understand anything?" exclaims he, eagerly, light breaking in upon him. "Let me explain. Did you think I wasn't in a hurry to see you again? What a thought! Last Tuesday, Duncan's boy—you know that pretty lad their hearts are so set on?—came to utter smash on the hunting-field, knocked in some of his ribs, and broke his arm, and was carried home to his mother all but dead."

"Oh, poor, poor woman!" says Mrs. Charteris, growing pale, and drawing a step nearer to him.

"There was no end of a sensation, as you may imagine; and in the middle of it came your telegram; and how could I leave them then in their fear and agony, not knowing if the poor little chap would live or die? Could I do that?"

"I should never have forgiven you if you had,"—with impulsive warmth. "Go on. He lives? He is better?"

"Yes,—better. I telegraphed to you the moment I had your message, and this morning, as the doctors pronounced him out of immediate danger, I ran up to town."

"Poor little fellow! How dreadful for Mrs. Duncan! Are you sure he will recover?" asks she, full of pity, going quite close to him this time.

"Yes. I hope he will be all right in time. I hope so. He is such a plucky little lad, and so lovable. What was it you thought, Fancy?"—taking her hands gravely. "That I did not care to come?"

"Well, something like that. At least I said to myself, 'Hunting hath charms.'"

"As if I should name the best run I ever saw in the same day with five minutes of your society!" replies he, with flattering haste.

"Shouldn't you?"—archly. "Then I have actually met with one man who can love me a great deal better than his

horse, and immeasurably dearer than his dog! I'm flattered."

"I love you a thousand times better than anything on earth; and you know it," returns he, slowly, yet with exceeding warmth.

"I don't. I can't bring myself to believe it," declares she, with a provoking glance upwards and a pretended pout, that renders her absolutely irresistible.

"Why?" says Arthur, eagerly.

"Because"—coquettishly—"you have been here nearly ten minutes, and——"

"Yes?"

"You have never once kissed me," murmurs she,—most unfairly, considering all things.

"My darling, how could I, when every glance you gave threatened to slay me? Fancy, is this just, or honest, or even kind?"

"If I am unjust, and dishonest, and unkind, as your words seem to imply, I wonder you stay with me. Why don't you say a harder thing still and tell me I am ugly? And—I sha'n't have a whole bone left in my hand, you know, if you insist on holding it much longer."

"It's mine," says Arthur, audaciously: "I shall hold it as long as I like. And as to staying here, I am going to spend the day with you. I'm going to dine with you. Nothing on earth shall induce me to leave this house until the night is far advanced."

"For what sin am I so heavily punished?" demands she, in a deplorable voice. "What have I done, that this burden should be laid upon me? Do you really mean it? Am I indeed fated to endure your society all day? Well, if so I suppose I must only make the best of the situation and be civil to you. To begin, then,—you may kiss me once,—only once, mind, or I warn you I shall be dreadfully angry."

But he has her in his arms by this time, and has kissed her, not once, but many times. Whereupon she says, promptly, on finding herself at length released,—

"Now consider me dreadfully angry." But she says it fondly, and with such a radiant smile as belies her words.

After this they draw their chairs close to the fire and each other, and begin a softly worded conversation about every-

thing under the sun, and especially the intense misery they imagined they endured while parted one from the other.

Then she tells him she is going down to stay with the Brookes, at which he decides on putting in the next two weeks at the Blundens', who live about four miles from the Brookes. This will enable him to see her daily and take her for long delightful *tête-à-tête* rides, and so on, until they can go down to Wiltshire, where they have both been invited to stay with the Luttrells.

"But I wish you and Lady Blunden were on better terms," he says, presently, in a rather regretful tone.

"Well, I'm sure she ought to regard me now with a favorable eye," says Fancy, with a light laugh. She has, of course, long ere this confided to him the entire story of the grand reconciliation-scene, of the triumphant means by which it was effected, and of her own glorious part therein. "Just think, if you and I were to quarrel and separate all about some absurd matter, and——"

"That is just what would never enter my brain. I could not think about it. It is too improbable. We shall never quarrel,—never."

"Then we shall be the dullest pair in Christendom. The sun would be unbearable, you know, but for the summer breezes. But to return: don't you think Lady Blunden ought to be very grateful to me? Considering her dislike to me was based from first to last on purely imaginary grounds, I feel she ought to be ready now, at any moment, to receive me with open arms. Don't you?"

Of course he does. He entirely agrees with her on this and every other subject, as he would with equal *empressement* were she utterly in the wrong.

"You see, you are so much prettier than she is," he says, in an apologetic tone. The apology is meant for Kitty. Oh that Kitty could but hear him! Evidently, according to Mr. Blunden's lights, the fact of one woman's possessing more beauty than another is sufficient to cause everlasting rancor in the breast of her to whom Mother Nature has been least kind.

"Oh, no, I am not, indeed," protests Fancy, who is quite pleased nevertheless. "She is quite lovely; I am only pretty. Of course you, you silly boy, think me perfection,"—with a

benevolent smile. "But prejudiced opinion never counts. If Cyclamen was here she would sneer you down in no time."

"All the Cyclamens in the world could not change my opinion. In my eyes you are, and always will be, the 'queen rose.'"

"What did I say about prejudice a moment since? You are infatuated,"—slipping her fingers fondly into his. "Few will agree with you. Cyclamen thinks Lady Blunden quite a vision of beauty,—a thing to dream of, and so on. I'm so sorry, by the way, that you have missed Cis this morning. She had to go out early, and won't be back, I fear, for some hours."

Mr. Blunden expresses himself grieved to the heart's core at this news, and lies fearfully—and, what is worse, unsuccessfully—in such expression.

"I don't believe you," says Mrs. Charteris, with a merry laugh. "That's what I call a tarradiddle."

"So it was. I confess it," says Blunden. "A most unmitigated lie."

"Rude boy. Do you know"—glancing at the clock—"I must go into town myself presently? I have an appointment at my dressmaker's. I positively haven't a decent gown—not one fit to be seen in—in which to go to the Brookes."

"I never knew a woman who had," says Mr. Blunden. "Well, take me with you, will you? I shall get into low spirits if you remove yourself out of my sight. I dare say I shall be able to put in my time whilst you are getting measured and chalked, or whatever they do to you."

"I don't mind if you do come," says Mrs. Charteris, graciously.

So he goes.

CHAPTER XLII.

"Come, come, a hand from either :
Let me be blest to make this happy close ;
"Twere pity two such friends should be long foes."
Two Gentlemen of Verona.

DANDY DINMONT is at the Towers ; Brandy Tremaine is at Laxton. "At daggers drawn" is a pleasing and truthful figure of speech in which to describe their relations towards each other. They have never been face to face since that last uncomfortable night at Twickenham, when something momentous and analogous happened to both.

Sheer dislike to meeting his sometime friend has kept Dinmont, since his return to the country, from visiting Gretchen, who has been, and always will be, among those dearest to his heart. But one morning a stinging and well-directed remark from the unflinching Flora bearing boldly on the subject of cowardice, and heavily larded with the word "afraid," sends him round to the stables and into a saddle, and well on the road to Laxton, almost before he knows what it is he intends doing.

Arrived there, he makes his way up-stairs and into a room, where, of course (it being just the sort of thing that would happen, Fate being of a mischievous turn, and so prone to play pranks with her poor helpless victims), he finds Brandy alone.

Mr. Tremaine is lost in a perusal of the "Times." He is half smothered in its dull and unpleasantly-scented sheets ; but, hearing a sound behind him, and firmly believing the door has opened to admit Sir John, whom he has been expecting, he flings down the paper, and, rising, turns to greet him with a seraphic smile.

Tableau !

It is a smile of short duration. In fact, it melts like dew beneath the morning sun. It is nowhere in no time. On seeing Dinmont, his whole expression—erstwhile so benign—undergoes a rapid change ; indeed, the sudden transition from

"sweetness and light" to gloom and sourness is not only startling but almost tragic. The open dislike he would have shown at any time at his rival's presence is now increased tenfold by reason of his having been cheated into welcoming him with a smile.

"You! I thought you knew I was here," he says, wrathfully, regarding Dandy with indignant eyes. And that young gentleman takes fire on the spot.

"Certainly I did," he replies, promptly. "But I could not allow your presence, however distasteful, to prevent my calling on your unfortunate sister."

"I have yet to learn, sir, why my sister is to be considered as unfortunate."

"She is yours, isn't she?" asks Dinmont, calmly. This is the "retort *discourteous*" with a vengeance. Brandy's color rises.

"You always were first-class at riddles, you know," he replies, with a fine show of contemptuous disgust.

"Glad you are equal to my last," says Dandy, gazing pensively at a tiny teacup belonging to the time of Queen Anne that rests on a table near him.

"I should be a poor lot if I wasn't equal to more than that," says Brandy. "I flatter myself I'm equal to most things; and I rather take it I'm more than a match for you, at all events. By the by, it just strikes me I haven't seen you since that last night at Twickenham."

Here he stops, and, after an apparent struggle with good taste, gives way to wild mirth,—or at least a capital imitation of it.

"You seem amused," says Dandy, sadly. "I don't hope for much, knowing the quarter it comes from, but may I ask why you laugh?"

"Pray pardon me," says Brandy, with open satire, "but, do you know, I have quite a horrid trick of laughing when I am amused. Odd, isn't it? So uncommon! I was thinking of your costume and your figure generally on that last festive occasion when I had the—er—pleasure of seeing you. If I were you, you know," with another and a still more offensive chuckle, "I shouldn't go in for Royalty again. It didn't fit you. I expect you aren't destined to grace a throne; so, if you are wise, for the future chuck it up. Your sceptre

didn't by any means 'show the force of temporal power.' Several times as I watched it and you my blood ran cold. I thought you were going to trip over it and measure your length on the ground. And that"—mockingly—"would have been 'a dainty dish to lay before' Mrs. Charteris. I can almost hear her laugh."

"I *did* hear her laugh at you," returns Mr. Dinmont, mildly. "She wanted to know where you got your trousers, and if that fellow at Hengler's lent 'em to you. She said the clown's dress became you *à merveille*; and she made some remark, I remember, about your being 'to the manner born.' She is amusing when she likes, and can talk well, and to the point, which is everything."

"And when did she say all this? And where?" demands Brandy, black with rage, yet affecting a sneer. "Been to see her lately? She is home, I hear. You used to be very fond of calling on her at one time."

"So I used,"—with unruffled calm,—“and was always received by her very kindly.”

"So you used to say,"—unpleasantly, and with a shrug. "Not that I myself could ever see much of the open arms business about it."

"Oh, I never meant for a moment to insinuate that she was in the habit of embracing me," says Mr. Dinmont, with a slight grin, whose turn now it is to laugh grimly, his companion's temper being "absent without leave."

There is a pause. Brandy is making a vain but meritorious effort to bring his small fair moustache within reach of his teeth,—with him an unfailing sign that he means mischief. He is evidently meditating on some crushing blow calculated to smash his rival. His rival, with his arm on the mantel-piece and his eyes fixed gloomily upon the coals beneath, is as evidently preparing a crushing blow for him.

Presently Tremaine, turning so as to face him, says, sneeringly,—

"I think, if I remember rightly, that day before Lady Monckton's ball you told me you meant to propose to Mrs. Charteris the following evening. Of course"—in a doubting tone, yet with some secret anxiety—"you kept your word?"

"Yes, I did," says Dandy, stoutly, removing his arm from

the mantel-piece, and turning to face the foe with bayonets fixed.

"You—proposed to her?"

"I have said so,"—indignantly. "Didn't you hear me? By the by, did you keep to your word that night? You too declared your intention of trying your luck."

Tremaine hesitates.

"Oh, you funked it, did you?" says Dandy, with withering scorn.

"No, I did not," exclaims Brandy, stung into confession: "I too proposed to her that night, and——"

"She refused you."

"She did,"—desperately,—"and"—with the positive air of one who knows—"she refused you too!"

"Ignominiously," returns Mr. Dinmont, with a deep groan.

"No! you don't say so?" says Brandy, eagerly, forgetting his anger, forgetting everything, in his excitement; then, as though the quotation is forced from him, he says, dolefully, "Oh, spiteful love—inconstant womankind!"

But Mr. Dinmont is not to be outdone even in quotations.

"Oh, serpent heart, hid with a flowering face!" he murmurs, as though unconsciously.

Then follows a dead but eloquent silence; and then, their eyes meeting,—as though unable to help it or control themselves,—they both break into hearty, healthy laughter.

"Was she very bad to you?" asks Dandy, after a moment or two, during which they have drawn much closer to each other. They have grown solemn again, but active hostilities are plainly at an end, and the flag of truce is floating.

"'Bad' doesn't name it," says Brandy. "I shouldn't have believed it of her."

"But what did she do?"

"She laughed! Positively laughed! At one point it may be said that she roared!" says Mr. Tremaine, gloomily.

"She did the same to me," says Dandy, in a low tone; and then they both feel there is nothing left to forgive.

"And for five months we have been bad friends because of this woman!" says Brandy, regretfully, looking at the carpet.

"If you are as sorry for all that as I am, you will let any ill feeling between us end here, now, this moment," says Dandy, earnestly.

"With all my heart," says Tremaine, warmly, extending his hand, which is gladly accepted. Indeed, being only boys still, they look as if they would dearly like to indulge in a good hug but for the shame of the thing.

Yet, now that peace has been fully restored, a great restraint suddenly falls upon them and holds them speechless.

"Look here, Tremaine," says Dandy, at length, growing very red. "There is something I should like to tell you; but I'm afraid you will find it very hard to forgive."

"Say on, old man. I feel as if I could forgive you anything just now."

"Well (I'm ashamed to confess it), but I—the fact is, I said awful things of you to Mrs. Charteris," winds up Dinmont, with a rush.

"Is that all?" cries his friend, evidently much relieved. "I am very glad to hear it. Now you are bound to forgive me. Why, you never could have said half as bad things to her of me as I said of you!"

This is so eminently satisfactory that this time they ignore the shame and embrace each other on the spot.

"After all," says Brandy, with enthusiasm, "'one friend is better than twenty lovers.'"

"Than twenty! Better than forty, you mean. Better than forty thousand," says Mr. Dinmont, with touching conviction.

"She is going to marry Blunden, I hear," says Brandy.

"She may marry any one she chooses, for me," says Dandy, calmly. "I've done with her forever.

'If she slight me when I woo,
I can scorn and let her go;
For if she be not for me,
What care I for whom she be?'

I think those very sensible verses. You don't catch me spooning after any woman again in a hurry. The whole lot of 'em aren't worth half I've gone through. Give you my honor," says poor Dandy, growing pathetic, "my clothes haven't fitted me for weeks!" This seems a crowning cross in Dandy's eyes.

"I hardly ever saw a prettier woman," says Brandy, with a faint sigh for glories past.

"Mere trick of the imagination," declares Dandy, stoutly, who, though apparently the most afflicted whilst the love-fever lasted, is now the quickest to recover. "Blue eyes, fair hair, creamy skin, rose lips, Greek nose,—see the same thing any day."

"There was something about her eyes——" muses Brandy, still regretful.

"Eyelashes, I suppose?"

"Sometimes"—sadly—"she had tears in them. They looked genuine: it is hard to believe they were the other thing."

"Crocodile's tears; onions," retorts his friend, unrelentingly.

"And when she smiled——"

"To show her teeth——"

"She looked as if she meant to say——"

"The better to eat you, my dear, like the wolf."

"Do you know, Dandy, after all, I think you are a right sensible fellow?" says Brandy, briskly, with a marvellous change of manner and a complete adieu to sentiment. "And I begin to think we are both well out of it. But what horrid fools we made of ourselves!"

"To be wise, and love, exceeds man's might," says Mr. Dinmont, sententiously.

"Come and let us find Gretchen," says Brandy, suddenly. "I dare say she is somewhere,—in the next room, probably, with Ken." He moves towards the door, and Dandy follows him. About half-way he pauses and regards his friend earnestly. "Tell you what it is, old man," he says, affectionately slipping his arm round Dandy's neck in the fashion that belonged to the early days of their acquaintance, "I'm right-down awfully glad to be friends with you again."

"Not more glad than I am," says Dinmont, with considerable fervor, meeting and pressing warmly the hand that rests upon his shoulder.

"But look here," says Brandy, thoughtfully, "we'll have to meet her again, you know,—bound to in the spring, or perhaps sooner, and—what shall we do about that, eh? Awkward, won't it? What?"

"Not at all," says Mr. Dinmont, undismayed. "Simplest thing in the world. Crowded room. Old dowager just in

front of you. Impossible to get at any one. Set up an eye-glass and swear one's sight is bad. The lie is so common now no one cares to investigate it. And eye-glasses, do you know, look rather form."

"I dare say,"—pensively. "One can always bow, too, and pass on, if recognition is inevitable. She has behaved hanged badly to us," says Brandy, a deep sense of injury rendering his tone stern; "and if ever I have the misfortune to meet her anywhere, nothing earthly shall induce me to be civil to her."

"You're right," replies Dandy, applaudingly, "I like your spirit; I feel just like that myself. If"—says Mr. Dinmont, with slow malice—"I was in a room with her forever, I shouldn't dream of opening my mouth to her."

Almost as these defiant words pass their lips they enter the next room through the folding doors. And there—seated on a low chair near Kenneth's couch, smiling and gay as of old—to their everlasting chagrin they behold—Mrs. Charteris!

Both young men change color. There is a decided pause, and then Brandy's face relaxes into its usual charming smile. Mr. Dinmont follows suit. Beauty's eyes and her little flattering start of pleased recognition have proved too much for both.

"So awfully glad to see you, don't you know?" says Brandy, positively beaming on the specimen of "inconstant woman-kind" before him.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, I'm sure," says Dandy, with suppressed effusion and a tender glance at the "flowering face" that hides the "serpent heart."

After which, catching each other's eyes, they have much ado to keep from giving way to the desire for laughter that is consuming them.

"How on earth did she come here?" says Tremaine, taking Dandy apart into a window.

"Don't know, I'm sure; haven't the faintest idea," returns that youth, faintly.

But I have. So I shall explain.

CHAPTER XLIII.

"All yet seems well, and if it end so meet,
The bitter past, more welcome is the sweet."
All's Well that Ends Well.

It is unnecessary, and, I should think, utter waste of time and ink, to tell you that on the day Mrs. Charteris leaves town to visit the Brookes Mr. Blunden also takes the train to seek the seclusion that the country grants.

This arrangement rather pleases Fancy, who at any time infinitely prefers another's society to her own, and is as near unhappiness as her sunny nature will permit when debarred from giving free expression to her sentiments.

She chatters unrestrainedly during the entire journey, and laughs, too, with such unfeigned merriment and lightness of heart at every passing thought as draws down upon her the scowls of two painfully plain, and therefore doubtless strictly moral, young women who are seated at the other end of the carriage. They are reading the "Quiver" and the "Leisure Hour" as though their lives depended upon their getting to the last page before the expiration of their journey. Only twice do they draw breath to ask each other if the magnificent scenery they are passing through isn't "very pretty."

Arrived at Laxton, Arthur sees Mrs. Charteris into the carriage that awaits her, and then pauses irresolutely before closing the door, as though undecided what to do next. He glances first at the dog-cart that stands ready for him in the distance, and then at Mrs. Charteris.

"Do you know you will have to pass Laxton Hall on your way?" he says, presently, with a mean but futile effort at deception. "I think I should like to see Dugdale, if you will take me so far. He will send me over to Jack's afterwards."

"You can drive there in the dog-cart, can't you?" asks she, with an unkind pretence at innocence.

"I hate dog-carts," says Mr. Blunden, without a blush. "I simply abhor them. Worst things out, in my opinion. And you have lots of room in there."

"I suppose I am never to be rid of you," returns she, making a little *moue*. "Well,"—drawing her skirts aside,—
"come, then."

So they drive to Laxton; and on the way Fancy awakes to the thought that she too would like to see Dugdale, and very specially Mrs. Dugdale.

"Won't it look rather pronounced, our arriving together like this?" she says, with a faintly amused laugh. "Not that I am afraid of her. She knows I am engaged to you; and, besides, she never thinks hard things of any one."

From a woman this is praise indeed.

At Laxton they are admitted. Yes, Mrs. Dugdale is at home. The servant leads the way, and they follow, through two halls and an anteroom, to pause finally before a certain door. It is thrown open; and Fancy, making a step forward, finds herself face to face not only with Gretchen, and Kenneth, and Flora Tremaine, but also with Sir John, and—Lady Blunden.

Some people are easily put out of countenance, others cannot be disconcerted at all, or, if they can, at least possess the charming knack of concealing their weakness. For one instant Fancy feels confused,—for so slight and swift an instant that no one is aware of it,—then, moving gracefully forward, she receives with smiling calm Gretchen's very gracious welcome. To Kenneth she says something excessively pretty, and, then, turning slowly, confronts Lady Blunden.

"How d'ye do?" says Kitty, gently, if coldly, holding out her hand. Whereupon Mrs. Charteris murmurs some other phrase equally unmeaning in a tone quite as civil and quite as cold; and then Arthur comes to the rescue. Every one draws a little breath, and listens to what he has to say with a most flattering because most unusual display of interest; and presently some one laughs (I am almost sure it is Fancy herself); after which, the ice being broken, conversation once more flows freely.

Kenneth, who is lying on a couch, is much exercised in his mind: the fear that Mrs. Charteris may feel herself somewhat out in the cold distresses his kindly nature.

"Mrs. Charteris, do not sit there," he says, in his most spoiled-child tone. "I want to speak to you; and, though

infinitely better than when last I had the good fortune to see you, I am so browbeaten, and tyrannized over, by a person who shall be nameless, that I cannot go to you. Have pity on me. Here is a pretty chair quite close to me; do not refuse to occupy it."

Fancy laughs, and, going over to him, sinks into the cosy lounging-chair he has pointed out; and it is almost at this instant that Brandy and Dandy make their valiant entry.

"How pleased you two boys look!" says Gretchen, presently, noticing with real delight the fact that a fresh bond of friendship has been sealed between them.

"Yes," says Brandy, gayly, "'glad as birds are, that get sweet rain at noon.' That's Swinburne, isn't it?"

"They've made it up," says Miss Flora, slowly, examining the late belligerents with a critical eye.

"You mistake," returns Brandy, calmly, though secretly much annoyed: "we are not made up at all; we neither powder nor paint, nor have we as yet learned to worship at the shrine of that inestimable person named Allen. We don't require it. Nature to us has been lavish in her gifts."

"I know all about it," persists Flora, unflinchingly, and speaking with all the air of one who is cognizant of a mighty secret, and who is not only prepared to divulge it at a moment's notice, but positively dying to do so.

"You generally do know more than you ought to know," mutters Brandy, with suppressed indignation but much wisdom, withdrawing from the contest.

Kitty has been standing apart for some minutes. Sir John, Arthur, and Dugdale are deep in some momentous argument that bears on setter pups. Gretchen is busily engaged restoring peace between Flora and Brandy.

Fancy, seeing all this, rises quickly from her seat, and, going up to where Kitty is standing, says something in a low tone. As she speaks, her fair face flushes, and an expression that is almost entreaty grows within her eyes.

Kitty pales a little, and, laying her hand—with the old involuntary gesture—upon her bosom, makes her some quick reply. Nobody can hear what is being said. No one is heeding. Presently, as Fancy still speaks, Kitty's face changes, grows troubled, and at last tears show themselves within her velvety eyes. Fancy holds out her hand; and Kitty,

taking it willingly, holds it for a little while and presses it warmly.

"Then we are friends," says Fancy, in a soft tone, that trembles ever so slightly.

"Yes,—yes, indeed: it was all a mistake," returns Kitty, in a low voice.

Then, turning to her husband, she says, hastily,—

"You must help me to persuade Mrs. Charteris to come and stay with us when her visit at Brookville is at an end. Arthur"—with a faint smile—"will, perhaps, stay on with us, and try to make the country a little less dull for her."

"I'm sure I hope you will come to us," says Sir John, heartily, addressing Fancy, and looking surprised, but very pleased.

Every one is pleased, especially Gretchen. Brandy and Dandy exchange a sly wink behind their backs, which, being intercepted by the indefatigable Flora, draws from her lips a dignified rebuke.

"It is a charming arrangement," says Gretchen, when Fancy has accepted the invitation. "You make me almost regret"—laying her hand with a fond pressure, and a glance of ineffable tenderness, upon Kenneth's shoulder—"that I must leave you all and go to Italy. But perhaps"—with a passing look at Arthur and Fancy—"some of you will follow us there before long."

"Do: come, all of you," says Kenneth, pathetically, "if only to keep us from boring each other to death."

"I should like to go immensely," says Miss Tremaine, advancing from the background, that being a position she very seldom affects.

"No! You don't say so!" exclaims Brandy, enthusiastically. "Well, you shall go, then; and I shall be your escort. Let us start at once. It is no distance; just a nice little walk."

"I wonder whether it will be Hanwell or Colney Hatch?" murmurs Miss Flora, in a dreamy tone, meant to wither, and with a glance of lively scorn.

Kitty, turning to Mrs. Charteris, says, with a little fond blush,—

"You have not seen my baby yet, I think. I brought him with me to-day, to let his auntie see him. You know

she is his second mother. Come up-stairs with me, and I will show him to you."

After which, if any woman thinks the reconciliation is not quite complete, all I can say is, she knows nothing about it.

* * * * *

And so—down with the curtain, and lights out! The play is over, and the poor players flit like pale ghosts into the gathering darkness. Will you—as I ask you—give them a kind thought? With this request, "I kiss your hand, and so leave you."

THE END.

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